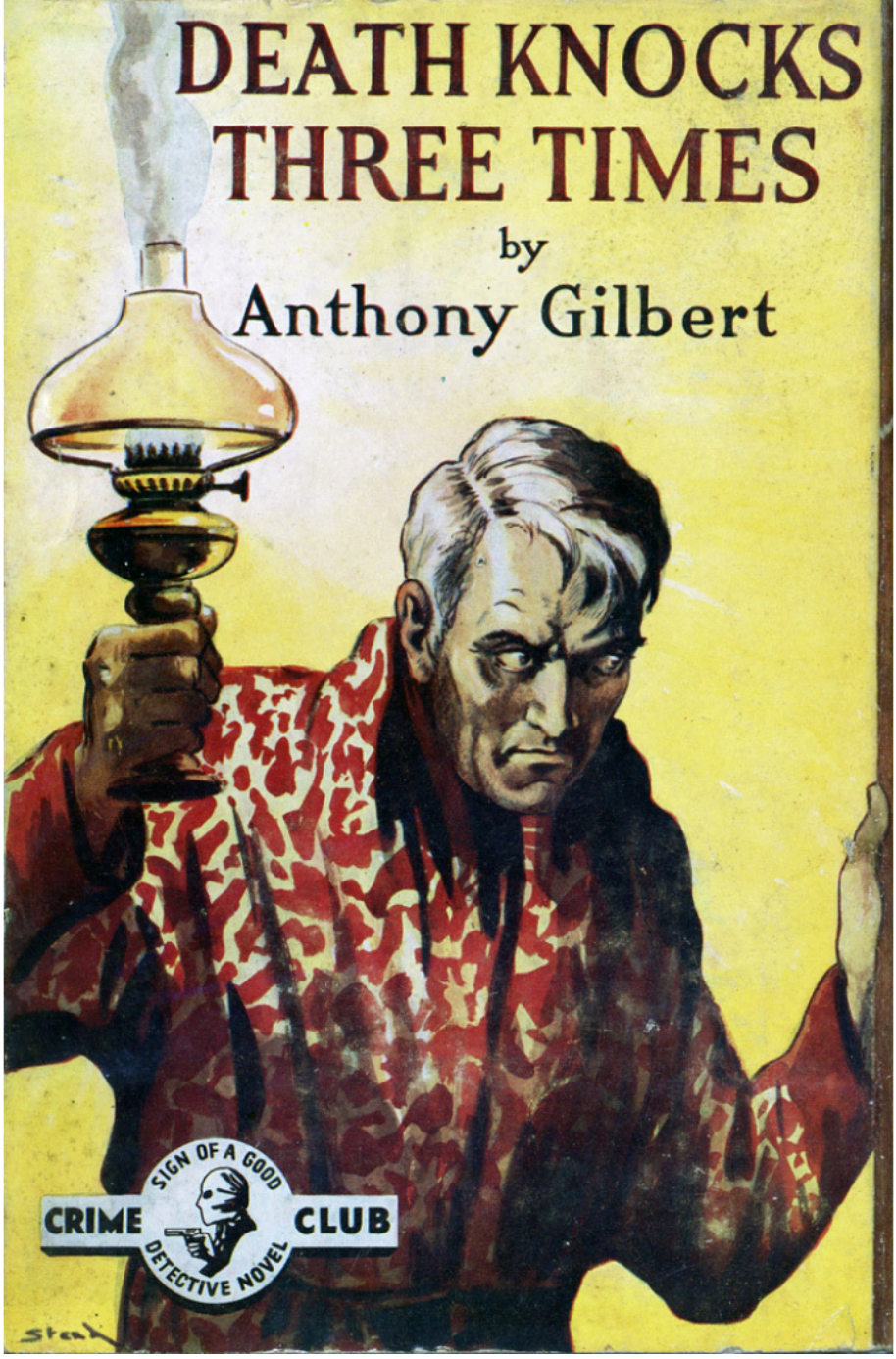
DEATH KNOCKS THREE TIMES

by

Anthony Gilbert



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1

EVER since midday the rain had poured down with such ferocity that the whole moor seemed awash. To the solitary motorist the aspect was one of complete desolation. It was so dark no feature of the surrounding countryside was really visible, and it would be possible even for a man who knew the moors well, as Arthur Crook did not, to slip into a ditch or one of the great potholes that dotted the face of the land.

It occurred to him that the general outlook must resemble that of the world on the first morning of creation, and not much further removed from chaos at that. He had heard nothing for an hour but the groaning of trees, the beating of the rain, and once, the derisive cawing of a crow going home.

"Oh, shut up!" he admonished it, since going home was precisely what he was trying to do and it looked as though he might never get there. It was a long journey from London and Mr. Crook had only undertaken it on the insistence of a client who couldn't persuade the police that he was not at a place where several witnesses were convinced he had been one night during the previous month. The job was taxing even the versatile Mr. Crook's wits— not to say the endurance of his little car—to the utmost.

"When this chap sees how expensive innocence is, his jaw'll drop •with a bang that'll be heard at Piccadilly Circus," he reflected characteristically, bumping off the twisting lane across the moor onto the main road again, and thinking it would be the last drop of honey in his cup if one of the wheels buckled in protest. He nosed his way along more by some sixth sense than by sight or hearing. "One thing, there's not much chance of running any one down on a night like this. No one's likely to be abroad except an escaped

convict from Manderley Jail, and if I take off one of his legs I should probably be awarded the Police Medal for Gallantry."

The road seemed at last to be leading away from the moor,, though where it led he had no notion. He had lost his bearings a long time ago. There was still no sound but the pelting rain, and it seemed improbable that any one else was crazy enough to be abroad. Presently he realized there were hedges on either side of him, and so, he argued, sooner or later he'd reach a farmhouse or a church or some landmark that might show him if he was going back on his own tracks.

"Let there be light," he prayed, taking a corner on three wheels — =the fourth was spinning wildly in the air, just above a ditch.

Immediately a golden gleam wavered out of the dark.

"Unless this is Bogeyland and they have will-o-the-wisps here, that must be a house of some kind," decided Arthur Crook, steering the car carefully in the direction of the light.

Abruptly the light disappeared, but he was not disconcerted, for he was close enough by now to realize this simply meant a curtain had been drawn over a window, and windows don't hang in midair even in isolated moorland country. A moment later he came to a dilapidated gate standing open, and drove in.

It seemed a very long drive, and he passed a wall of black windows before a gleam behind the drawn blind showed that at least one other human creature existed in this apparently dead world. Another instant and, in response to a fanfare on his horn, he heard a voice. It was high-pitched with age, rough with a kind of satisfied fear.

"Is that you, Mr. John?" demanded the apparition as the door opened wider, outlining a square-set figure against the light of a lamp in the hall behind him. "Are you out of your senses? You know the Colonel …"

"Not yet," interrupted Crook cheerfully, gently pushing the speaker back into the hall, "but it won't take me long to put that right."

The old man, realizing a shade too late what was happening, made a wild grab at the door, but Crook put out a leg-of-mutton hand and closed it for him.

"Easy does it," he said. "Just give me the low-down on the Colonel. I wouldn't like to wreck our first meeting …"

"Who are you?" demanded the old man, furiously. "If you've come from the Government …"

“Tell ‘em that in Whitehall,” said Crook. He was observing his surroundings with fascinated, popping red-brown eyes. The hall in which they found themselves had all the appearance of a stage set, and now that he came to look at his companion he thought he’d look better on the boards. He was wearing a sort of old-fashioned livery and Crook knew they don’t generally come so fancy in 1949.

“Who in tarnation are you?” demanded the butler, as Crook took him to be. “You’re a stranger hereabouts, that I can see, or you’d not be coming to the Hall at this hour.”

“How did you guess?” inquired Crook, thinking this was almost good enough for E. A. Poe or that American comic artist chap, Charles Addams, the huge dark hall, die stairs stretching away into infinity—for the lamp shed only a limited circle of light—the tattered floor coverings, the worn stair carpet, the huge handsome chair embossed with a crest that, to his untutored eyes, looked like an oak tree bearing oranges, the carved black chest across the hall —big enough for a body, he reflected characteristically—the vista of closed doors, the quality of the silence, a listening quality, as though behind each of those doors was an enormous ear.

“We only want the clank of a chain and we’re in the middle of the Christmas Carol,” he thought.

“Here, you can’t come inside,” exclaimed the old man, as if discovering for the first time what had happened. “Colonel’s orders.”

“You go and ask the Colonel if he’d rather find my corpse drifted by the flood against his bedroom window at dawn,” suggested Crook. “Haven’t you got any ears? Can’t you hear that rain?”

“I don’t need to go outside to hear that,” exclaimed his companion, speaking in a more human voice. “I’ve only got to sit in my pantry and I can listen to it coming through the roof. If I’ve told the Colonel once about that pantry I’ve told him a hundred times. Believe it or not,” he continued, raising the light to examine the intruder more closely, “I’ve found a drowned rat sometimes after a storm like this.”

“Best way to find them,” suggested Crook.

The old retainer—the word seemed to suit him admirably— stared in an irresolute manner at this unconventional guest He

saw a stout man in bright brown shoes and a vulgar billycock hat, and a suit brighter than either. He shuddered.

"You didn't ought to have come to the front door,"^ he said in severe tones. "And if you haven't an appointment …"

His voice broke off abruptly as another was lifted from the head of the stairs.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Bligh?" it shouted. "Who the devil are you gibbering at in that dark hall? If you've been at my port again …"

"Coming, Colonel," said the old man hurriedly, backing toward the stairs and taking the lamp with him. "It's a motorist …"

"What's that?" The footsteps came nearer and began to descend the staircase. "Have you let someone in? Haven't you had instructions … ?"

"I thought it was Mr. John, sir."

"And why should my nephew materialize on my doorstep on a night like this?" scolded the old martinet. "Have you been having clandestine correspondence with him again?"

"No, sir. Certainly not, sir. But when I heard the car …"

"You know Mr. John hasn't got a car. And who's driving a car these days without gas? Come on, man, answer me. Who is he?"

Crook thought it time to take a hand in the conversation, and stepping forward from the blackness that engulfed him, he announced himself as the stranger within the gate.

"Then you can take yourself without the gate," stormed the aged anachronism on the stairs. "You've no right to be on my premises. It's trespassing. Don't you know enough of the law … ?"

"What I know about the law 'ud surprise you," said Crook, "Don't murder mean a thing to you?"

"Murder?" The old voice sharpened. "Who's been murdered? If it's on my ground, it's self-defense. Bligh, why don't you keep me informed of what's going on?"

"More ways of killing a baby than strangling it," observed Crook, before the bewildered old man could speak. "Drowning, for example. And my mother never had me taught swimming when I was a boy."

The colonel now drew abreast of Bligh and snatched the lamp out of the old man's hand, thrusting it toward the unwelcome visitor.

"If you're selling anything," he threatened.

"Only my company," Crook assured him. "And that's gratis. Fact is, I've missed the road."

"Served you right, being out of doors on a night like this. Where are you making for?"

"Haydock."

"Then you're miles off your road. Have to go around by the toll bridge." He paused. "Come to think of it, the road'll be under water. Did you say you came here in a car?"

"That's what I call her," agreed Crook modestly.

"I won't have cars on my property and that's final. Every one knows it. Cars—faugh! Only good to frighten horses."

"We didn't meet any horses," offered Crook, in what he thought was a conciliatory tone.

" 'Course you didn't. Aren't any. This damned Government. Chap can't do what he likes with his own land. Suppose if they had their way it wouldn't be my land. Once I'm gone no one'll give a damn what happens to it. Lived too long, that's my trouble."

Crook for once was inclined to agree with him.

"Where have you come from?" the old boy went on.

"Marchtown," said Crook, meekly.

"That's the other side of the moor." Quite clearly the Colonel didn't believe him.

"That was my impression, too."

"Are you telling me you brought your infernal car over the moor in this weather?"

"She brought me," said Crook. "Anyway, we started on a road."

The Colonel turned to the obsequious Bligh. "Is the feller drunk, d'you think?"

"Not if 'e's brought 'is car over that lane from Marchtown, 'e ain't," said the old butler with a note almost of reverence in his voice.

"Then he's mad. That's worse. If a chap's drunk you can lock him up and chuck a pail of water over him, and he'll have sobered by morning, but these lunatics …"

"Ring up the police and have me arrested," offered Crook obligingly, feeling that if he stayed here much longer he probably would be loco.

"Telephone? Wouldn't have such a thing in the house. When I

was a young man, let me tell you, sir, we used the adjuncts of civilization when we wanted to get in touch with our friends and we respected their privacy and expected them to do the same. No privacy at

all with one of the infernal contraptions on the premises."

Bligh's voice muttered, " 'E won't 'ave no radio neither. Makes it quiet-like."

"Makes a cemetery sound like Piccadilly Circus," Crook agreed. "I can see I'm a gift from on high to you. Now, sire, you unfreeze the cockles of your heart and let me sleep on the kitchen table or under it. Don't want to be any trouble, but though my little Scourge can do a lot, for a car, she can't fly and she can't swim. Matter of fact, I'd appreciate it a lot if you'd let me put her under cover somewhere."

"Don't want 'is death on your conscience, do you?" whispered Bligh in his employer's ear.

"I don't care where the feller dies so long as he doesn't do it on my property so I'm expected to attend the inquest." But very reluctantly he agreed to let Crook remain under cover until the storm was past.

"This won't stop all night," said Bligh, confidentially.

"I don't entertain these days," continued the Colonel in the same autocratic voice. "You'll have to take us as you find us. Bligh will show you where you can wash your hands. And there are stables. Never had a car in them yet, but I don't want you sending me in claims for damages."

Following Bligh up the stairs, Crook permitted himself to wonder whether he mightn't be more cosy in the stables with the Scourge than in the derelict old house. However, he had the gift of taking life as it came, which in the circumstances was just as well. The place was a veritable mausoleum. Corridors of rooms stretched away into the dark, all the doors locked, all the furniture within sheeted. Crook imagined, probably all devoured by moth and rust, and good luck to the moths at that.

"Who or what is the Colonel?" asked Crook, frankly.

"Crossed in love. That's what 'e is. More than thirty years ago. Going to be married to a proper young lady, all the 'ouse dolled up, new curtings, new carpets, and then at the eleventh hour she thought she'd sooner string along with a younger chap. So one day she jumped into a bus and went to Charing Cross and sent him a telegram from the station, signed with her married name."

Crook thought the old boy could give points to some of the modem novelists, who'd have taken forty thousand words to get to that point, but he didn't say anything and a moment later Bligh stopped in front of a closed door and set down the lamp on a table so thick with dust you could

have written your name in it.

" 'Ere's the bathroom," he said, flinging the door wide.

Crook took a step forward. "Holy smoke!" he exclaimed, "Call this a bathroom?"

"What the 'ell else do you suppose it is?"

Crook nodded. "You win."

It had been a bedroom once, he supposed, with its cavernous fireplace and a window seat covered with a ragged cushion. But he was prepared to wager everything he hoped to make from this current case that no fire had ever been kindled in that rusty, dusty grate. It was, however, the bath that held his attention. It was a huge Victorian monstrosity, with a heavy mahogany lid at present hooked up against the wall. The interior was chipped with the passing of years, and it stood on four enormous claw feet.

"Does he really get into that?" Crook asked in an awed voice.

"Every Wednesday. Mind you, 'e still calls it soft. In the Army, 'e says, a man gets into one of these saucer baths with a soldier servant to bring up the water, and that's what 'e 'as 'ere the other six days." He groaned piously. "All very well for 'im being so fussy about keeping clean, but '00 'as to carry the water? I'll tell you— me."

"Can't you get it from here?" asked Crook. "Or does he sleep in another wing?"

"I can get the cold 'ere; there's no 'ot. That 'as to come up from the basement, four blinking cans of it. Think of it, chum. Four cans of 'ot water brought up four perishing flights of stairs and this the year 1949. Why, in 1918 this bath should 'ave gone into the Chamber of 'Orrors and for all I know it may end there yet, and 'e calls it soft."

"How many jugs do you have to bring up on Wednesday nights?" asked Crook.

"Wednesday 'e 'as it cold—and 'im past seventy. But 'e's tough as a stringy old bean. Mind you, round about 'ere they think 'e's—you know." He tapped his head significantly. "Never no visitors, never no parties."

"No relations?"

"Only Mr. John. 'E's a nephew. Comes up about three times a year just to keep in touch -with the old man, 'e says; keep in touch with 'is money-bags, if you ask me. But 'e's got a disappointment coming, you mark my words. I'll get you a clean towel," he added, grudgingly, moving

away into the dark corridor and taking the lamp with him. As soon as his steps had died away Crook fished a torch out of his pocket and looked around. This place was a booby-trap, all right. If Bligh wanted to get rid of the old chap he only had to release the lid of the bath, shove the old boy's head under the water and then go for a nice walk. If he didn't drown he'd choke. Simple as pie. He looked at the great hooks that held the lid in place. They seemed firm enough, but you could never be sure.

Outside the rain roared and the wind shouted. There would be no going on tonight. Even this solid old barracks seemed to rock on its foundations.

Bligh came back with a fine, embroidered towel, and a piece of kitchen soap, but no suggestion of hot water. The mirror was hung too high for a man of his stature and the glass was silvered. However, he didn't suppose the Colonel would notice if he came down naked.

"This is a funny break," he reflected, presently following Bligh downstairs. "What's in it for Walter?"

2

SEEN at close quarters. Colonel Sherren proved to be a huge old man dressed in a very old-fashioned dinner suit and a fantastic black tie. Crook's characteristic reflection was, "Well, if he got a snap invitation to a fancy-dress ball he wouldn't have to change a thing."

The room in which the two men sat was enormous, cold as a coffin and, like the rest of the house, lighted by lamps. Crook told himself if anything happened to these two I suppose they could fossilize here before anyone discovered 'em.

He wondered, not too optimistically, if the old fellow had ever heard of beer. More likely to be offered a glass of vintage port, and he'd be expected to roll it about, nod his head and practically gargle with it. He wondered if Providence would strike him dead if he said he was a teetotaller.

"One thing, you've got plenty of room here," he remarked, controlling an impulse to shout. "Many evacuees during the war?"

"They came," said the Colonel grimly, "but when they saw we hadn't all these new-fangled modern conveniences they went away again. Quite right, too. I don't keep this house to shelter a lot of hothouse brats or aged lunatics."

Dinner was as bad as Crook had anticipated. During the interminable evening the old man unbent a little. He said he couldn't think how it was Crook had found the place at all. Crook said perhaps it was Providence.

"What's that mean?" snapped the Colonel.

"One of these days I might be some use to you."

"Good of you to suggest it. What d'ye do?"

Crook told him.

"Lawyer, eh? Nothing in that line wanted here. Got all my affairs

fixed up."

"Can't be sure," insisted Crook. "F'rinstance, how can you be certain you ain't breaking the law?"

"Which one?"

"That's just it. There are about ten thousand. No chap can hope to keep 'em all."

"And what can you do? Persuade the police I haven't broken it?"

"Could be," said Mr. Crook, modestly.

"Humph!" The old man snorted. "You ought to meet my nephew. He writes books."

"Oh, yes," said Crook, looking intelligent. "What you buy off stalls on railway stations. Me, I don't use the railways much."

"If they try and sell John's claptrap at railway bookstalls it's not surprising railway shares are dropping. It's my belief he bribes the publishers to put 'em out."

"Perhaps his wife," began Crook, but die old chap snorted.

"John's not married. He's a landlady's pet. And from the look of

him you'd think when she polished the furniture she gave him a polish, too. Face like an apple and eyes like currants. Always the little gentleman. Even in the war …" He broke off an instant, considering. Then, "What's M.I.5?" he shot out.

"Something hush-hush at the War Office, they tell me."

"Trust John to get on to something like that. Probably holds the world's record for listening at key-holes. Did well, he tells me. John Sherren, the Whitehall Wonder. But wear a uniform? Not him. Damn it, man, I said, can't you even join the Home Guard? But he might have got his dear little face dirty. Pshaw! My brother's boy. Posthumous. Brought up by women. Not surprising he writes novels, I suppose. The Bright Boy of Brakemouth, that's John. Faugh! Tell me some more about yourself."

And, some time later, "Mean to say if I managed to shove this fellow out of the window you could make a judge believe he'd done it himself?"

"Not precisely," said Crook. "I'd be inclined to plump for self-defense. Your heir waiting to give you a helpin' hand to the land of hope and glory. Naturally, you can't allow him to go breaking the law and—well, that's how I'd see it, and how the old bird on the bench would see it by the time I was through."

"Dear me!" said the Colonel, and his eyes gleamed. "And I gathered

from some nonsensical paper Bligh imported into my house that private enterprise was dead."

"Not at 123 Bloomsbury Street, it ain't. Next time you're in town look me up, won't you?"

The Colonel carefully wrote down the name and address.

"Better have the home one, too," Crook invited him. "It's only a couple of attics in S.W.5,, but at least I have 'em to myself."

"No Mrs. Crook?"

"Be your age," said Crook, rudely. "Do I look like a family man?"

"Quite so, quite so." The Colonel appeared a little embarrassed, as if he thought one confirmed bachelor should recognize another. "In any case, yours is a sufficiently dangerous existence as it is. If my nephew—but John wouldn't risk his precious life. What 'ud happen to literature if he snuffed it out?"

"Ah, well," said Crook, dismissing the subject of John as unimportant. "It cuts both ways. If there's a lot of chaps who'd like to

see Arthur Crook under the daisies, there's just as many who know it's them or me, and they'll make it tlieir job to keep me on my pins as long as I can stagger."

Bligh came in twice more and on the second occasion the old man exploded irritably: "What the devil's the matter, man? Mr. Crook and I can look after the fire, if that's all that's troubling you. Lock up and get off to bed. We don't either of us want hot milk."

"It's long after your usual time," muttered Bligh sulkily.

"What do you think you are? A nurse? I'll go to bed when I damn well please. Mr. Crook's right. I've been vegetating here long enough. You'd have me in a wheelchair with an ear-trumpet if you had your way."

Bligh departed with a very sour glance in Crook's direction and it was nearly one o'clock before the two men reluctantly left the ashes of the fire and made their way to the ice-cold regions above. The Colonel insisted on showing Crook to his room, and stood in the doorway, complacently admiring his own hospitality.

"Got everything you want, I hope," he said, looking from the bleak blue blind—he presumably included curtains on his list of womanish luxuries—to the stark furniture, the ragged carpet and the bed, an iron monstrosity with one brass knob missing. There was an enormous washstand supporting a double set of toilet ware, a gigantic wardrobe, an

empty grate and a general smell of mice. Beside the bed, on an octagonal bamboo table, stood a china candlestick.

"And you know your way to the bathroom?"

Crook said he thought so, but the Colonel insisted on showing him. It was just as well he did, as Crook would never have found his way alone.

"Handy," said the Colonel approvingly, looking around the ice-cold barn of a room. "Everything ship-shape." He drew Crook's attention to a long thorny object which looked like a strip of shredded wheat eight or ten inches long and which he referred to as a loofah. Crook had seen these Spartan washcloths in many English bathrooms, but never by any furthest chance could he have been induced to use such an instrument of torture. It was secured to a string and fastened to a cup-hook on the lid of the bath; a sponge as big as a man's head dwelt in a wire basket similarly secured. "All

these flibbertigibbets," the old man went on. "No method. Get into the bath, find you've left the sponge on the basin. I like things to look as neat as my orderly room used to."

Crook said faintly that was nice, wasn't it? Yes, he was sure he could find his way back, and listened to the Colonel's retreating footsteps. They seemed to retreat a very long way. As for Bligh, he probably slept up in the attic or down in the basement or where-ever the kitchen was situated.

It was some time before Crook could nerve himself to remove his coat; as he had anticipated, the bed was as hard as a plank; the linen sheets felt like iron; there was one pillow stuffed with stones, and he caught his big toe in the elaborate fringe of the white mar-cella quilt.

The night seemed endless, as all nights do when you don't sleep. The house rocked and creaked, the stairs groaned. Once a door slammed loudly, but whether that was Bligh, the Colonel or the storm Crook didn't get up to discover. He crawled out in the morning convinced he was black and blue, and was instantly relieved to find the rain was over and an optimistic sun had appeared. True, the roads seemed mainly under water, and no man who respected his car would have dreamed of taking it out, but Crook would have backed the Scourge against Noah's Ark, and he came downstairs whistling vaingloriously to find Bligh putting the finishing touch to the cheerless breakfast table.

"Sun inside and out," approved Crook, pausing on the threshold. "What d'you do with yourselves all day in this back of beyond?"

"Make 'istory. Leastways, the Colonel does. D'you take sugar with your porridge? Because there ain't any."

"I don't take porridge," said Crook.

"Blime, you're going to be 'ungry. The old gent don't keep *ens."

"What time does the pub open?" asked Crook.

"Ten o'clock."

"I can last till then. How often does the heir pay a visit?"

" 'E's coming today, if you want to know, 'Ad a card this morning. Why don't you stop on and meet 'im?"

But Crook said cheerfully that must be a pleasure deferred.

"Why, you're not thinking of coming 'ere again, are you?" asked Bligh, in alarm. "You'll upset 'im proper if you do. 'E's talking of going to London as it is."

"Why not?" asked Crook.

"Why not? Because it 'ud be the death of 'im. D'you savvy the old chap's never seen a traffic light?"

"He ought to be in a museum."

"If they find 'im wandering around Piccadilly 'e probably will be. Nor it ain't no joke neither. It don't matter 'im being cuckoo up 'ere with only me to know, but in London they'd send 'im out on a chain, like a traveling bear."

"Oh, come," said Crook. "What about the R.S.P.C.A.?"

It was slightly disconcerting when the Colonel came storming in and asked Crook who the devil he was.

"If you're from the government about the lower meadow you can save time—and gas. I've told you already …"

"Not me," said Crook, "and it 'ud be a waste of breath, because I don't suppose I'd understand when you'd finished. Crook's the name."

"You remember, sir," broke in Bligh. "Last night …"

"Probably thinks I'm part of his nightmare," said Crook, quite unmoved.

The Colonel was staring at Crook in an uncertain manner. "I seem to have seen you somewhere. Why, of course, you're the chap who drove a rattletrap across the moor in yesterday's storm. Sleep well? Slept like a top myself. You at the first battle of the Somme, by any chance?"

"Yes," said Crook.

The old man looked delighted. "Now, that's a most fortunate

occurrence. I am writing the only reliable history of World War One. Now, what is your view of the engagement?"

"Bloody," said Crook. But not, he decided a little later, much bloodier tlian this breakfast.

As soon as he could, he made his farewells and prepared to depart.

"I have your address," said the old man, looking as if he'd stepped out of one of the early feature films, say about 1911, "and you may be hearing from me at any time."

"Always at your service," responded Crook, and stepped thankfully into the Scourge.

3

BACK in London Crook found his hands full. It was an ill wind that blew no one any good, and the ever-increasing list of controls and prohibitions put more and more names on his clientele.

"I wonder if the old boy takes my advice and drowns his nevvy in the bath," he wondered aloud to Bill Parsons. "Unless Bligh blows the gaff, the poor devil could turn black before any one thought of looking for him there."

That was Tuesday. On Thursday Bill came in with an early edition of the evening paper.

"Where there's Crook there's crime," said he, reversing the slogan that had sprung up round the lawyer's name. "Only not quite the way you expected."

Crook took the paper from his outstretched hand. He skimmed it rapidly. Tragic end to Thirty-Year-Old Romance, he read, and Jilted Bridegroom in Bath. On the day following Crook's departure from Chipping Magna, the old Colonel had taken his last bath. According to Bligh, he had entered the bathroom as usual about eight-thirty, locking the door behind him. At nine-thirty, alarmed by his master's non-appearance and receiving no reply to his frantic bawling, the old servant smashed down the door and found the lid of the bath had somehow fallen, killing the old man instantaneously.

Crook put the paper aside thoughtfully. Coincidence played a large part in life, as he well knew. Indeed, he had come across any number of coincidences that novelists, chaps like this Sherren fellow, for example, would never dare use in a book. All the same, it was damned odd. For thirty years the old gentleman had been taking a bath, and there had never been any mishap. Now, following the combined visits of himself, Crook,

and Whatsisname Sherren, the old fellow was out for the count. And yet —that lid had been hooked back securely enough a couple of nights ago. If it had got loose it was because someone had deliberately released it. The question confronting the coroner, supposing he had wit enough to reach the obvious conclusion, was who.

Crook was still pondering this point when he received an unexpected visitor in the shape of a police officer.

"The police are making inquiries about a man called Sherren who was found dead in his bath at a place called Chipping Magna yesterday," the Inspector began, regarding Crook with about as much affection as a communist wastes on a fascist. "Ah, I see you have the paper in front of you."

"My publicity expert called my attention to it," explained Crook.

"In the dead man's diary is a note of your name and address and his servant tells us you were there on Monday night."

"Monday night at eight," agreed Crook. "He thought he might be looking me up at some time."

The Inspector looked sceptical. "You do realize he hadn't been away from his home for thirty years?"

"Never too late to mend," suggested Crook. "It occurred to him a little holiday might be a good idea."

"Any special reason?"

"Do you need a special reason to come to London?" asked Crook, who would have been happy to spend eternity wandering those grimy streets. "By the way, how about the nephew?"

"What about him?"

"I thought he was payin' a lightnin' visit on the Tuesday. Or was Bligh pulling my leg?"

"We've seen him," said the Inspector. "He's a Londoner, too. According to his own story, he can't help. Arrived Tuesday midday, left Wednesday morning. The old man didn't take his bath till the evening, so he was all right then."

"It isn't the old man, it's the lid of the bath that matters. It was hooked back all right when I was there on Monday, and you can take Arthur Crook's word for it, it couldn't have unhooked itself. You can also, if you like, take ray word for it that I didn't do the unhooking."

"Mr. Sherren says he didn't notice the bath."

"Don't see how he could help it," objected Crook.

"Didn't notice anything special, I mean. He didn't take a bath himself, though apparently his uncle told him he could have it on Wednesday morning."

"Damned patriotic of hira," said Crook heartily. "I'm a patriot, too, come to that. It seems we both qualify for the Gaitskell Medal. And I must say, from the look of him, I should think Bligh qualified, too."

"No doubt," agreed the Inspector. "Now, you're quite sure the lid was secure when you were there on Monday?"

"Quite. And what's more, no accident could have torn the lid from its moorings. Strong as the heart of Sir Galahad, they were."

"And you didn't experiment in any way with the hooks?"

"Not me. I expect to be paid for trouble, I don't go looking for it for nothing. You only had to see the thing to realize what a good tombstone it 'ud make. No, I left it reverently alone, and did my bit of cleaning up in the basin, a nice, elegant affair with pink honeysuckle all around the rim."

"That's what Mr. Sherren says, too. Added that he wouldn't risk his life in the bath, if it meant turning up on the Judgment Day with dirty fingernails."

"How about Old Man Kangaroo? The malevolent manservant?"

The Inspector grinned suddenly. "He puts his money on you. Thinks you have an experimental nature."

"Lucky, ain't it, British justice needs proof before it can clap a chap into the little covered shed?" observed Crook calmly. "Not that I had any motive, but I know that ain't necessary."

"There's another point. Even if the lid was unhooked, why should it come suddenly crashing down? Its weight should have held it in place."

"No," said Crook, slowly. "That's the ugly part of it. The old boy kept his loofah and sponge hooked onto the lid. Quite a natty idea so long as the hooks held. Then he wouldn't find he'd left the sponge in the basin when he was nice and cosy in the bath. You see what that means? If he snatches at the loofah and starts scrubbing his spine, he'll pull the lid forward and if it ain't secure it'll come crashing down on him before he can do a thing about it. For one thing, sheer shock 'ud probably immobilize him till it was too late, and even if he did put an arm up to save himself, I doubt if he'd have the strength (in a seated position, remember) to fob it ofiE. It looks to me as though that might be the way it

happened."

"But that's murder," ejaculated the Inspector.

"You're the boss," said Crook. "If you can prove it, I'll come to your night school."

But his face was sober enough. Of course, the old boy had been as crazy as a coot, but all the same he'd had the refreshing flavor of individuality in a stereotyped world. Not Hitler or the present Government would have succeeded in wheeling him into line. It wasn't nice to think of him in that murderous bath with his handsome, obstinate head stove in.

The Inspector got up. "Thanks for your information," he said. "You'll be wanted at the inquest, you know."

Crook's face became alert. "Special gas ration? There's no train service there."

"Not my department," grinned the Inspector, "but you'll man-age.

"Nasty case," said Crook, drumming his thick fingers on the table-top. "Means, motive and opportunity. That's your layout, isn't it? Means—open to all. Motive—your turn to answer that one. I don't know what the old boy had to leave …"

"Quite a considerable sum," said the Inspector. "Or so I understand."

"And the heir?"

"Who do you suppose?"

"Well, not John Sherren. At a guess I'd say Bligh."

"What makes you pick him?"

"There had to be some incentive to stay in that death-in-life for thirty years. Question is, how much did Bligh know? And John Sherren? He was the only livin' relative, wasn't he?"

"Seems like it. This is going to be one of those exasperating cases where there's no proof anywhere, just one chap's word against another."

"With half the community thinking Bligh guilty and the other half plumping for Sherren, and both sides knowing they could handle the case better than the police anyway."

The Inspector rose.

"Don't be too modest," he suggested. "And don't forget the inquest's being held tomorrow afternoon."

"If I was dealin' with reasonable chaps it 'ud be enough for me to put in a statement," grumbled Crook. "I can't tell 'em anything.

I knew it was too good to be true getting a bed and breakfast (and, ye gods, what a bed and what a breakfast!) without havin' a bill for it next morning; but I tell you this. Inspector, I could stay at the best hotel in London for what that bed's goin' to cost me, and nothing in it anywhere for Arthur Crook so far as I can see."

The inquest was being held in the billiard room of the dead man's house. Bligh had removed the covers and dusted off a few chairs, and the police had moved the body and were in attendance. The coroner, who clearly thought there was something fishy about the affair, elected to sit with a jury. When Crook arrived he found the nephew, John Sherren, already on the premises, having been recalled immediately by a telegram from Bligh, who had had to tramp down to the village post office to send it off. The whole village was set by the ears by the news. The old man had been a mystery in life and now was providing an additional mystery in death. It's against convention for old soldiers to die in such undignified circumstances. They should either succumb to an aneurism or high blood pressure in bed or be found in the gun room with a bullet through the brain and a revolver firmly clasped in a dead hand. Baths are out, decided Crook, giving the nephew the once-over and not thinking much of what he saw.

John Sherren was a man of about forty, slightly below medium height, with a round rosy face, brown eyes that stuck out a bit, a neat small mustache, hair growing rather thin on top but still a long way from baldness, very tidy, very precise, obviously concerned about the present position. Crook thought him smug in the ordinary way, and the dead man's phrase "landlady's pet" came back to him very forcibly. A babe in arms could have told you he was a bachelor and likely to remain one.

The coroner was in no mood to make things easy for anyone. He made it clear from the start that he didn't like the case, he didn't like John Sherren, and he didn't like Arthur Crook. Crook reciprocated at first glance, and thought John did the same.

He had a word with the novelist before the court opened.

"What on earth does he want a jury for?" the younger man inquired. "It's a clear case of accident."

"Clear to you, perhaps," agreed Crook, "but then you're on the inside, as it were."

"What else could it be?" continued John Sherren peevishly.

For a novelist, thought Crook, he seemed to be on the unimaginative side.

"There are always three horses runnin'. Accident, murder or suicide."

"That's absurd. Why should Uncle James want to take his own life? And if he did he wouldn't choose this way."

"You should know. But he was an original old cuss—no disrespect intended—and he might like the idea of bothering his survivors." But he didn't really believe that was the solution. You'd want an iron nerve to take a chance like that. It wasn't even certain you'd be killed.

"As for murder—again-—why? At this particular juncture, I mean. Why not last year or the year before?"

"That's what the coroner's here to find out. Hold your horses. They're goin' to begin."

The coroner outlined the situation. Cause of death was not in debate, but the manner in which that death had come about was open to question. They had to decide if it was accident, and if so, whose carelessness was responsible. If it was not an accident there were two alternatives. Either the Colonel had deliberately set free the lid himself or someone had laid a trap for him. The jury would hear the evidence and must give a true verdict in accordance with the facts. There seemed no doubt that the lid had actually been pulled down by the dead man himself; indeed, the loofah, attached by its thick cable, was still in his hand. The head had taken the full force of the blow, and there were injuries to the skull, as well as dislocation of the cerebral vertebrae.

"Means 'e broke 'is bloomin' neck," muttered one juryman to his neighbor.

"Why don't he say it plain, then?" said the neighbor in carrying tones.

The coroner then proceeded to call his witnesses. It was going to be a job to show it was suicide, reflected Crook. The old man had no troubles, financial or domestic, and, for his age, he was in excellent health. He hadn't a morbid temperament, and only a day or two earlier he had remarked to Bligh he saw no reason why he shouldn't live to a hundred.

John Sherren, in the witness-box, said unhesitatingly that there

was nothing to support a suggestion of suicide. "In fact," he averred, "he seemed in better spirits than I had seen him for some time.

Quarrelsome, too, and that was always a good sign. He spoke of coming to London, getting about before he got into a rut, he called it, or became too old and set to travel. When I reminded him that London would have changed a good deal in the past thirty years, he retorted that he came of a tough generation, not like some of the milk-and-water youngsters of today. He said he hadn't seen a doctor professionally for twenty-five years, and he hoped it would be another twenty-five before he did."

That part of his evidence was plain sailing, but he got into a little trouble when he was asked to tell in detail about the quarrel of which he had spoken, and to which Bligh was prepared to give testimony.

"It was quite insignificant," he said, trying to pass the whole affair off airily. "Violent? No, I should hardly call it that. It was simply that when I warned my uncle he'd find London greatly changed and perhaps hardly the place for an old man he, as it were, blew up. Took offense. Asked me if I thought he was a nincompoop. Or perhaps I was afraid he was coming south to consult his lawyer, but I needn't worry about that. I should be no worse off, that much he could promise me."

"And what did you deduce from that?"

"I really didn't give the matter much consideration. I'd never discussed finance widi my uncle, and fortunately I had a competence"—yes he actually said competence—"of my own, and then there are the royalties from my books."

The coroner made it perfectly obvious that he had no knowledge of John Sherren as a writer and had no intention of correcting his ignorance.

"Did he say anything else?"

"I told him I was quite uninterested in his reasons for coming to town, and he said, 'You're even more of a fool than I imagined. What's more, you're a liar. Why else do you come up here without an invitation if you don't hope to draw dividends?' "

The fellow was either incredibly naive or intelligent above the average. Crook decided, spilling the beans like that. He seemed, however, to have taken the wind out of the coroner's sails.

All he could think of to say next was: "So there was no foundation whatever for your uncle's suggestion? Is that what you wish the jury to understand?"

"None whatsoever."

"And naturally you resented it?"

The pink face assumed a yet more cherubic expression. “Why, no, hardly that. I knew the poor old boy was eccentric—who wouldn’t be, living in such conditions?—it would have been absurd to take offense.”

“And he didn’t reveal the nature of his intentions as regards the will?”

“We didn’t discuss the matter further.”

Even the coroner didn’t like to press him on that point. He passed on to ask a question or two about the bath, but here, too, John proved unhelpful. He hadn’t taken a bath, he never had taken a bath at Chipping Magna, he hadn’t examined the fittings and certainly he hadn’t tampered with them. By this time half the jury thought he’d done the old fellow in (and you couldn’t blame him) and the other half thought what a nice chap he was, taking so much trouble for that old curmudgeon. On the whole, if murder had been done, they would all prefer to suspect Bligh, who had been rude to every one for twenty-five years and bullied the shopkeepers about the Colonel’s rations in a way that didn’t bear remembering. Any one, said the butcher, who was acting as foreman, would know he’d been a sergeant-major.

Which was flattering but incorrect.

Bligh’s manner was the antithesis of John’s blandness. He seemed resentful at being questioned at all, and said if he’d wanted to kill the old gentleman he’d had thirty years to do it in. No, he hadn’t known he was the Colonel’s heir, not till the lawyer told him, after the old gentleman was dead, and he didn’t want the money special anyhow. Yes, he’d heard Mr. Sherren say the Colonel might be visiting his lawyer, but where did that get them? The old man had been in a rare mood, but then it was always the same when Mr. Sherren came up. He (the Colonel) had said he wasn’t going to be talked down to by a lah-di-dah from London, speaking as if a fellow had one foot in the grave just because he didn’t write novels nobody wanted to read anyway. He said he’d be surprised if his nephew lasted as long as he did. Deflected from that line of talk by the indefatigable coroner, he said he hadn’t tampered with the bath, not likely. If he

did let the lid down it ‘ud need two men to hook it up again (this; was not strictly speaking accurate, but Bligh, like John Sherren, sometimes allowed himself a little poetic license). He admitted thav the lid was unhooked, but added in pointed tones he wasn’t the only person in

the house who might have monkeyed with the bath, and it seemed queer to him that a thing like this had to happen directly the Colonel started acting the Good Samaritan. The coroner pulled him up again there, and soon afterwards he left the witness stand.

Then it was Crook's turn. Even in this remote district his name was not entirely unknown, and a number of locals had turned up to see him in die flesh. One thing. Crook told Bill on his return, they saw plenty of that. For he was getting heavier as he got older, though he could still move like a flash, or so it seemed to younger, lighter men trying to keep up with him, and no advancing years dimmed his sensibilities. He repeated his story about the lid of the bath being securely hooked into place on Monday night. If he had any suspicions he didn't mention them, not then.

When his evidence was finished the jury had to come to a decision. It was obvious to all of them that one of the four men who had been in the house during the three days preceding the death of the oldest of them had tampered with the hooks, but when it came to fixing the responsibility on one particular pair of shoulders they found the problem beyond them. John Sherren certainly had had words with the old man. They debated how much weight you could attach to that. Every one, said the foreman, knew the old man was a tartar, a bit daft, come to that. There was a tale of a girl who had at one time been employed in the house who had lighted the dining-room fire so that it smoked. The Colonel had marched in, wrapped in a terrifying dressing-gown and waving a walking-stick, shouting: "In India a man has been hanged for less than that." It wasn't likely, therefore, that John would take his rage very seriously, and you are very serious indeed before you bash a man's head in. On the other hand, hadn't the young chap expected to inherit? He said not, but there was no need to believe him. The case against Bligh was founded on the fact that he did, in fact, come into everything the old boy left, and if the Colonel was coming to London it might have altered his whole way of life, including the way in which he meant to dispose of his money. Once away from the remote homestead, as one of the Sunday

papers pathetically and inaccurately described it, he might strike fresh roots and it 'ud be the poorhouse for Bligh. There was that to be considered. Most of the evidence depended on his word, and who was to say he hadn't smashed the lid down on the old martinet's skull and made sure of his own future?

As for Crook, they wasted no time on him. There was no motive there, and they dismissed him summarily from the case.

The verdict was what Crook had anticipated—death by misadventure—with insufficient evidence to throw responsibility on any one.

Before he left for London—still at the expense of the unfortunate rogue responsible for his original journey north—Crook was approached by both his fellow witnesses.

First came Bligh, more pasty-faced than ever and adopting a threatening attitude.

"Now don't you try and come the Mr. Clever over me," he said in loud tones. "Oh, I know what every one's saying, if they ain't allowed to say it in court. Nice for Jimmy Bligh coming into all that cash—though most of the old man's leavings are in land, and what's land worth these days? Can't even build on it if you want to. Can't sow what you like, can't let it go to pasture, can't lease it. Sign on the dotted line all along. A perishing nuisance, if you ask me. And even if it was all cash, that wouldn't help much. What's a chap of my age want with a lot of money?"

"Plenty of chaps 'ull help you spend it," Crook suggested.

"Lots of wimmen, too, but I've done without 'em for thirty years, and I'm not going to get tangled up with them now. I tell you, I was all set for the duration. 'Ome, a boss I understood, as much time off as I wanted, and as much money as I could spend. Come to that, I was a lot better off last week than I'll ever be again till I lie where the Colonel's gone."

He stalked off without giving Crook a chance to reply, and his place was almost instantly taken by John Sherren.

"That old chap's nearly as crazy as my poor uncle," he confided, falling into step. "D'you suppose any one's satisfied with the verdict, bar Bligh, of course?"

"You should have heard him five seconds ago," said Crook, grimly. "You'd think he'd got twenty years hard labor instead of everydiing the Colonel's left."

"He won't be able to stay in these parts, of course," acknowledged John Sherren. "Too many people thinking him just the man who was lucky enough to get away with murder, but with all that money he can settle nicely enough elsewhere. But nobody's deceived. Nobody believes this just happened. You don't yourself, do you?"

“Not exactly,” agreed Crook, “but naturally it was impossible to bring in a charge of murder.”

“I suppose you’re right. Mind you, I keep an open mind.”

“Sure,” agreed Crook amiably. “Maybe the old man unhooked the lid himself and forgot about it. How long had you known the cash wouldn’t come to you?”

“I gave my evidence in court,” said John in polite tones. “He did mention, though, that he wouldn’t care to put temptation in my landlady’s way, whatever you like to make of that.”

Crook looked at him thoughtfully, as if making up his mind what he really thought about his companion, but whatever it was he kept it under his own hat.

“Of course,” continued John in the same precise tones, “it was consistent of him, having lived a mysterious life, to die a mysterious death. I wonder if the truth will ever come out.”

“Any time I like to open my mouth,” said Crook, pleasantly. “But that doesn’t happen to be just now. Be seeing you—perhaps.”

Nobody knew then how soon that occasion was going to occur.

4

JOHN SHERREN returned to London in a very thoughtful frame of mind. Six months ago, he was reflecting, he had possessed three relatives, all a generation ahead of him, all in reasonably sound health, all, he believed, with a little money, or even quite a lot of money, and all incurably unmarried. And during the past six months two of these relatives had died suddenly and inquests had been held. Now only Aunt Clara was left.

Clara Bond was his mother's elder sister, and after the erstwhile Jessica Bond's death, when her son, John, was four years old, Clara and her younger sister, Isabel, had taken the little boy into their home and brought him up. John's father, the Rev. Clement Sher-ren, had discovered a missionary vocation immediately after his wife's death and went out to preach the gospel to the natives. Less than a year after his mother's death John became an orphan and his Aunt Clara took over his life. She was a born manager. She had managed her mother very capably into her grave after a short mortal illness when she herself was only twenty-six. Thereafter she prevented her father from contracting "a deplorable second marriage," according to her self, and after he had, not unthankfully, followed his wife to the cemetery, she closed the huge, inconvenient house in which she had been born and removed herself and Isabel to Seaview House, a delightful modern residence set right on the cliff. Isabel liked the situation less than her sister. Heights made her giddy, and nothing would induce her to sit on the balcony that seemed built right over the sea. Down, far down, were rocks, mostly hidden by the tide, but showing like black shadows when the water became shallow, a persistent reminder of their existence.

"I didn't suggest you should fall off the balcony," snapped Clara.

‘But the sea air is very beneficial.”

When he was a small boy there was no question which of his two aunts had John Sherren’s confidence. Clara was tall, pointed and shining, with the remnants of great handsomeness; she made people think of a darning needle and, like a darning needle, she could draw blood. Isabel, on the other hand, was one of those soft dumpy little people who make you think of a baby owl grown up without altogether losing its engaging youthfulness. Isabel used to say that if Clara remained unmarried it was by her own wish; she had had a number of most eligible offers, but she had a great sense of duty. John was surprised to know that any one had dared propose marriage to so alarming a woman; it proved that civilians also earned the Victoria Cross on occasions, not for momentary bravery but for sustained courage. Isabel was different, very gentle and warm-hearted, with a tendency to tears, to little rushes of affection, to small hands laid for an instant coaxingly on a coat sleeve. She didn’t want to manage, she only wanted to mother. Unlike Clara, she had never wanted votes for women, she wanted to be told not to bother her pretty little head over things she couldn’t understand.

With Isabel, then, John established a secret relationship in his youth. She used to cover up for him when there was likely to be trouble with Clara, and she tried to get him the particular toys or books he wanted. Clara was Spartan with money.

“When you’ve grown up, John, and are earning a living, you can squander your money if you wish, though I hope my training will produce better results. But remember, money has to be earned. Every time you spend a penny someone has given you, you are paying for your pleasure with someone else’s toil.”

John inherited a small income from his mother’s estate when he was twenty-one, and thankfully left his aunt’s house and came to London. His capital, carefully and even enterprisingly invested, brought him in enough to live on in a frugal way. He had no major vices and, though he would have shrunk from admitting it, he preferred women in print to women in the flesh. He took his work very seriously. Every time—that is, about every two years—a book »of his appeared he would go around the shops and libraries and make sure it was being properly displayed. If he found it hidden away on some obscure shelf he would take it down and leave it carelessly in some conspicuous place. In libraries he would pick up a

copy—there never seemed a great run on any of his works— and hang about until he got into conversation with some fellow-borrower, when he would say speculatively he'd heard very good opinions of this fellow's work.

In the press of his work he didn't forget his aunts. He paid them visits every two months or so, and he wrote to them for their birthdays, and usually went down to Brakemouth for Christmas. During the June before Colonel Sherren's death he spent two or three days at Seaview House, and at that time he was struck by a great change in the younger sister. She had always been timid, hesitant, given to hurried whispering in corners, little pushes, bland assumptions of indifference that deceived no one. In short, she had no confidence at all, and breathlessly agreed to anything her more dominant sister proposed. But this particular summer she seemed suddenly to have discovered a personality of her own. She even sat out on the balcony, a thing she had never done before. And it wasn't alwayt convenient, she suggested, to fall in with Clara's plans.

"I am sorry," she would say calmly. "I don't think I can accompany you to the Denvers tomorrow."

"What can you be doing?" Clara would demand, and Isabel, with a little toss of the head that was certainly new, would smile and say she simply didn't particularly care about visiting the Denvers. Mrs. Denver was a very monotonous conversationalist— didn't Clara really think so?

"It is most inconsiderate of you," Clara scolded. "They will think it very strange your absenting yourself, after I accepted for both of us."

But Isabel said, "No," she hardly thought Mrs. Denver would notice whether she came or not. Pressed inexorably by Clara as to how she intended to spend the afternoon, she said tranquilly she thought of going to the cinema.

"Really, Isabel, you cannot expect me to offer the Denvers such a frivolous excuse. You can go to the cinema any day."

"I really am not concerned with what the Denvers think, Clara. And as to going to the cinema some other day, the programs are changed on Thursday and I should miss seeing this particular picture."

"One would almost think," said Clara, icily, "that you had a rendezvous." She glanced at John with a small, pinched smile. But John didn't smile back. He was really just like scores of other authors. He wrote because he enjoyed writing, he made very little money, very few

people had heard of him, and he spent most of his time either thinking about the book he was writing now or the book he was going to start whenever he could get an idea. He got the faint scent of one now. Aunt Isabel and a rendezvous! Well, why not? He remembered his publisher saying to him once: "Woman's second blooming is always a hot penny."

And really Isabel was looking almost coquettish. She was more fortunate than Clara, he decided. These willowy statuesque girls became angular, frigid old ladies, while the soft plump ones simply got softer and plumper. Not, of course, that one would approve of Aunt Isabel going to extremes. The Colonel, he had been given to understand, had left quite a packet, presumably dividing the bulk of it between his two daughters. Isabel had once whispered to him, "Of course, dear, everything I have will come to you eventually," by which he imagined she meant that Clara would have the use of the income if she survived her sister, and that when she, too, died, Isabel's portion at least would come to that well-meaning, painstaking but virtually unread novelist, John Sherren.

When they were alone together he teased his aunt gently.

"I believe you're developing a secret vice," he had said.

"I suppose I seem a very old lady to you, though I am ten years younger than Clara, but even as you get near the end of your life you may find compensations you never dreamed of. Of course, it's different for you, you're still quite a young man with, we hope, a great many years ahead of you. I dare say you're a little disappointed sometimes, about your work, I mean. But, don't you see, one day you may be as well known as—as Charles Dickens."

"Oh, come, Aunt Isabel," John rallied her. "You know you don't really think that, nor do I."

"But that's just my point." She was extraordinarily urgent. "It may be just the thing one doesn't anticipate at all, that seems absolutely fantastic, that may be waiting for you around the next corner. The important thing is to be prepared. Don't look over your shoulder at the past all the time. I've done so much of that in my life, and then of course you miss what's coming toward you. And though you can look backwards, you can't walk backwards."

He said, "Something's happened to you. Aunt Isabel. I can see that."

At once she seemed apprehensive. "Oh, no, dear. That is—don't say anything like that to Clara, will you? It's just that—I begin to wonder if I

haven't perhaps been rather foolish with my life, 1 mean. It isn't enough to be just negative, one should be positive …"

John didn't put his thoughts into words, but he felt pretty certain his Aunt Isabel wasn't going to the cinema alone. Those ideas she had been voicing had been put into her mind by someone else.

But when he tried to draw her out a little she took fright and wouldn't tell him anything.

John had no intention of raising the matter with Clara; he knew she wouldn't confide in him even if she knew anything, which was doubtful. Instead, he decided to have a word with Locket.

Locket, however, proved as unhelpful as even Clara could have been. "I have my work to do, Mr. John. I don't have time to go

around noticing whether people look different today from what they did yesterday. But if Miss Isabel is a bit brighter, you leave her be. She's had a hard row to hoe all these years, and she deserves any bit of fun that may be coming to her."

John was masculine enough to think that old ladies of sixty should be past thinking about fun.

"I notice she sits out on the balcony now," he went on. "That's a change."

"A good thing, too," snapped Locket.

"So long as she doesn't get giddy."

"She won't get giddy the way you mean." She laughed abruptly, and bustled off.

The same night, when Isabel went onto her balcony she was startled to find her nephew already there.

"I didn't frighten you, I hope," he asked with some concern. "I felt I must discover what it was that lured you up here night after night. Are you watching for a new star?"

She smiled at him in a warm and trusting way. "Clara was right about the balcony," she said, "though that doesn't mean she's always been right about everything." Her face took on a reminiscent look. Then, as though she shrugged aside all memories of the past that were not altogether agreeable to her, she went on in her usual eager tone: "It is delightful to sit here looking out to sea. I like to think of all the people sailing back to their lovers, the young ones going out to seek their fortune."

John leaned forward. “I believe I can actually see the lights of France. It seems so close, doesn’t it?” The next moment his voice changed. “Take care, Aunt Isabel. I don’t think this balcony is very safe.”

“Oh, come, John, you’re trying to alarm me. Clara would be very cross with you if she were here. She’s been trying to induce me to sit out here for weeks and months, and now, when at last I have taken her advice, you’re trying to dissuade me.”

John caught the balustrade and shook it gently. “These balconies were made for appearance rather than use—at all events, this part of them. You tell Aunt Clara she ought to get her man to come and have a look at this. Oh, I know you don’t weigh much more than a bouncing ball, but there’s no sense taking unnecessary risks.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary, dear,” returned Isabel cosily, “Anyway, I never go near the edge.”

He shrugged, turning back toward the lighted room. “You must do whatever you wish, of course, but if you come to a disastrous end, remember you were warned.”

Really, he reflected an instant later, she was almost too sensitive. At his words the light died out of her eyes; her face was white.

“What made you say that, dear? You shouldn’t. It’s not lucky. A disastrous end, indeedl” Then, for the second time, she recovered herself. “You see what a silly old woman I’m getting? Quite superstitious. My second childhood, Clara calls it. Now, John, you are to promise me you won’t go frightening your Aunt Clara with stories about this balcony not being safe. She would only try to stop me from sitting here, and really I do need a little privacy.”

“So long as you remember to be careful,” agreed John, and he returned to town the next day.

5

IT REALLY was very odd. He hadn't been back forty-eight hours when he got a telegram recalling him at once.

Serious accident Aunt Isabel

Just as, six months later, he was to learn of his uncle's sudden death within twenty-four hours of leaving the old man's house.

He showed Clara's telegram to his landlady, the worthy Mrs. Pringle. "I do hope it's nothing to do with the balcony," he said. "I should feel quite responsible. I believe I ought to have mentioned it to Aunt Clara, after all."

The landlady, who was proud of her lodger and was helping him to pack a bag, said comfortingly that probably it was one of these road accidents, and, in any case, she was sure he hadn't anything to blame himself for. But John felt anxious all the way down to Brakemouth.

A taxi driver, who recognized him as Miss Bond's nephew and not, as John would have preferred, as a well-known novelist, confirmed his suspicion that the balcony was the cause of the accident. A shocking thing, he said, poor lady. At Seaview he found Locket looking as grim as grief would allow her—she really had been devoted to Isabel, he remembered—and Clara as rigid as one of those wooden dolls dear to an Edwardian childhood. When she saw him she said: "I suppose you have heard what has happened? The whole neighborhood appears to be buzzing with the news. When I was a young woman there was a quality called reticence. You didn't, if you were a gentlewoman, concern yourself with other people's business."

John repressed a desire to say that such a Golden Age had never

existed, and laid himself out to be sympathetic. He asked how it had happened and who had discovered it.

"It happened presumably because Isabel leaned too far over the balcony and part of the woodwork gave way. I discovered it. It was most harrowing. Your aunt had not come down to dinner, so I went up to her room, which was in darkness. However, I knew she sat a good deal on the balcony, day-dreaming, I suppose, so I went out there. Of course it was obvious at once what had occurred."

John said hesitantly. "The—the body? It's been recovered?"

"Some fishermen picked it up from the rocks this morning."

"And—were there—of course there must have been—injuries, I mean?"

"There was a wound in the head, but the doctor considers that may well be due to her striking her head on the rocks when she fell."

John drew a deep breath. "A regrettable accident," he murmured.

Miss Bond took him up sharply. "Accident? Of course it was an accident. I hope you haven't been listening to malicious local gossip."

"I—no, of course not. I haven't seen any one. Why—^why shouldn't it have been an accident? I warned her …"

Miss Bond was on to that like a hawk dropping on an unfortunate shrew-mouse.

"Warned her? Of what?"

"Why, that the balcony wasn't safe, of course."

His aunt looked as if she couldn't believe her ears. "You knew the balcony was unsafe, and you didn't say a word to me?"

He mumbled something about Aunt Isabel asking him to say nothing, and promising to be very careful.

"My dear John, you must have been out of your mind. You know how forgetful Isabel is—was, rather. Of course I see now what happened. She was mooning there and she leaned over and went crashing down. Really, John, you can't be absolved from all blame. I don't want to make things difficult for you, but if at the ^ inquest any one suggests anything except accident …"

"What could they suggest?" asked John, looking bewildered. "I mean, no one could want to murder Aunt Isabel."

"Really, John, I begin to think you are out of your mind. Of course there is no question of murder."

"I never supposed there was," he muttered. "After all, why should anyone suspect such a thing?"

"Of course not. But—Isabel was always impulsive and she was not always the best judge of what was best for her, and so …"

"You mean suicide?" Astonishment jerked the words out of him. "Oh, but surely that's out of the question. The last time I saw her, only a day or two ago, she was happier than I ever remember her. I got the impression that something she had always hoped for had happened at last."

"May I ask what she told you?" The old voice was brittle as fine glass.

"Oh, nothing definite. But people who are as happy as that on Monday don't throw themselves over balconies on Tuesday or ei^en on Tuesday week."

"My dear John, I thought you claimed to be a realist. It is precisely people like Isabel, who live entirely by temperament rather than by any reasonable theory, who take these drastic steps. Still, as I say, this death was an accident. You will be able to go on the witness-stand and repeat what you have just told me. That should silence lying tongues. I am afraid it was common knowledge that she was always a little peculiar …"

"You mean, you're going to let people think she was non compos mentis'7d"

"I said nothing of the kind, and I will thank you, John, not to

twist my words. But she was utterly at the mercy of her emotions. If I had listened to her I should have had the house filled with strays, human and animal. Did you know she once actually wanted to adopt the baby of some immoral housemaid we had? She cried for days when I told her it was out of the question. My father recognized this unreliable trait in her. That is why he left all his money to me to be administered for the two of us."

"Do you mean," asked John incredulously, "that Aunt Isabel had nothing of her own?" It was unthinkable.

"A few pounds, perhaps, from our mother's jointure. But all the household expenses came out of my purse. I promised my father to make a home for her until she married. Unfortunately, marriage was out of the question; she was quite unsuited to such a life. But I intended to devote all my time to making a home for her, as our dear father wished. Now,

don't forget what I've told you. John, are you listening to a word I say? You look perfectly dazed."

John might have retorted that he was—by the information he had just received. What would other people think, what suspicions would they harbor? Not that it mattered. His Aunt Clara intended to get a verdict of death by misadventure, and of course she was successful.

When the inquest was over John inquired whether he could be of any assistance in settling his deceased aunt's affairs.

"There's nothing to settle," said Clara, briskly. "In any case, our man of affairs, Mr. Twemlow, will be down tomorrow, to give me his advice. He was unable to come today, as he had to attend the funeral of another client."

"Very tactless," murmured John. "Of the other client, I mean."

There was clearly nothing to be gained by prolonging his stay, so next morning he repacked his bag and came back to town. He couldn't help wondering who came into all the cash when the last of the sisters died. There was nothing in the old man's will to suggest that it would come to him. And with any one as unreliable as Clara it was hopeless to count on anything. Still, he was the last relative. He couldn't forget diat. Indeed, he brooded on it continuously.

Some time later he heard from Mr. Twemlow that a will had been found among Isabel's possessions, correctly drawn up and witnessed, leaving her personal belongings to Locket and any monies outstanding to her dear nephew, John Sherren. (Under the late Mrs. Bond's will the daughters' portions did not come to them absolutely; they might spend the income how they pleased, but on the death of one the interest passed to the survivor.) John's share of Isabel's fortune was not a large one; still, even a little ready cash was warmly welcomed, and presently Mr. Twemlow turned up some war bonds that Isabel had bought without consulting the lawyer, and a post office account, and it was agreed that these also were part of John's legacy. Nice little bonus, thought John, if it isn't the income I'd half counted on. Sweet of the old dear. And then … Poor Aunt Isabel. Didn't seem to get much out of her life.

The next news was contained in a letter from Clara to the effect that she was selling the house at short notice and moving into a hotel. Seaview was too big and then Locket was most inconsiderately going to look after a newly widowed brother, who had, declared the irate Miss Bond, no

claim on her at all, seeing they had hardly corresponded in twelve years. When John got that news he felt as though a weight had fallen off his shoulders. He had been haunted by the dread that his aunt might take a companion, one of those unscrupulous elderly women so popular in radio drama, who wind their tentacles around the heiress and are discovered, after the funeral, to have Inherited All. He went down at Christmas, as usual, only this time he put up at the Railway Hotel. As he anticipated, his Aunt Clara had already impressed her personality on her fellow guests, and a certain chair, the best, was regarded as hers, and newcomers were warned that she did not care to find it occupied when she came into the lounge. John exerted himself to talk of his own books, and an American offer his agents had managed to get for the latest of them. Miss Bond, however, had no intention of playing second fiddle to the boy she had brought up.

"I can't imagine why you write the sort of stuff you do," she observed clearly. "If I had time, I should write like Charles Dickens."

The next day he went back to London and dug himself in for a few weeks, until he adjudged it time to go north and visit his eccentric uncle. And once again, within forty-eight hours of his return, he was summoned to an inquest and a funeral.

So that made two inquests in the family in a little over six

months. There was only one of the trio left, but she was devilish tough. Quite likely to outlast him, thought John shrewdly and a little dejectedly, unless Providence or someone stepped in. That reflection cheered him a little. She must be worth a pretty penny, and she saved half her income. She had never said anything definite about her will and it was important to know where he stood. He was forty-one and he didn't trust the Government schemes to provide him with enough for his old age. His standards were too high for democracy. Still, who else was there to inherit? Locket? But no, he was sure Locket was out. There had been a very chill note in Clara's voice when she spoke of Locket's "defection."

No, he decided, no danger in that quarter. Then—who else? Clara wasn't one of these old ladies who spend half the week in church and the other half having the parish to tea. She told him once she rarely went to church.

"Whenever I see the vicar going up into the pulpit," she assured him, "I always think how much better I could do it myself."

“It ‘ud be damned unfair if she did leave the money to anyone else. Family money ought to stay in the family,” he decided.

And he was the only member surviving. Abovit Isabel now—what had Locket thought? However, the case was closed now. The coroner had given his verdict, the funeral was past and the headstone erected. Already most people had forgotten about poor frustrated Isabel Bond.

6

IN THE May following the Colonel's death, John Sherren published a book called One Fair May Morning, which was a detailed account of a hanging in the period between the wars, one of those subtle books that weave back and forth, starting with the condemned man's march to the scaffold and leaving him standing there shivering for 280 pages while the author traces his life from conception to crime and discovery. He was rather pleased with the title. He thought it was likely to fox the public, who would probably think it was a virginal romance, and so might be persuaded to read something worthwhile against their will. For though, like most people, he knew less than he thought he did, he did know that at a wet weekend, particularly in the country, people will read a Blue Book sooner than nothing, and in the country you can't go to Sunday cinemas or even Westminster Abbey.

When the book had been out a week, in pursuance of his usual routine, he began the rounds of the bookshops and so in due course he came to Garrods. It was at Garrods that he first set eyes on the Old Party. She was the sole occupant of the elevator into which he stepped to be carried up to the fourth floor, where the library was, and she fascinated him. In her he saw the perfect central character for the kind of book he liked to write. She was a tall, oldish woman, with a long yellow face that had never known rouge, a long severe mouth that had never known lipstick, a big nose diat was the rudder of the whole, brooding eyes that warned you not to try any of your nonsense with her; and her clothes matched her personality. She wore a basin-shaped black felt hat, beneath which her yellow forehead shone like marble, and her gray hair could be seen looped up sternly above the big ears and coiled in an old-fashioned manner on the back of her head; her blouse, what could be seen of it, was

black, very sombrely lightened by what used to be called a collarette in stiff while linen; she wore a black silk bow at her throat, and beneath that could be discerned the topmost button of a black woollen cardigan. Her skirt was long and black, her shoes were black and severe with pointed toes. Over everything she wore a loose-fitting brown coat of utility serge, and her fawn gloves were made of wool. She carried a shopping-bag and a shabby black handbag nearly large enough for a portmanteau.

John stood staring and entranced, forgetting all the good manners his aunts thought they had instilled into him. He might use her in one of those serial novels that deal with one person passing from household to household, a governess, perhaps, or a nurse—or, better still, a companion. But, of course, no ordinary companion. She had a fierce appearance, for all the indifference of her dress, a grimness that bespoke a gaunt strength, totally at variance with most people's conception of a companion. It might be possible to use her as a symbol of death. He distinctly liked that idea. Moving from household to household, death would follow in her wake and, since her motive in each case would be fanaticism rather than any personal gain or glorification—she might destroy the unwelcome element in each household—she would never be suspected. He was so much enthralled by this notion that the elevator reached the fourth floor before he realized it, and the Old Party had disappeared as the gates clashed to again. He alighted hurriedly on the floor above, jumped into a downgoing elevator and reached the library in time to overhear her conversation with the assistant.

There were a good many people standing at the desk, some of whom must have been there before her arrival. But the meek British quality of lining up apparently found no favor with her. Pulling a bright scarlet book out of her satchel she thrust it at the attendant who, to John's surprise, didn't say pertly that some people didn't understand about taking their turn, but accepted the book with a cheerful, "And what did you think of this. Miss Petti-grew?"

"Deplorable," said Miss Pettigrew, in a voice that matched her nose. "I could have solved the crime far more quickly myselL In fact, I had done so by page forty."

"It's going very well," said the girl in the same cheerful voice.

"In fact," continued the formidable old woman, "if it were really so simple I should be inclined to commit a murder myself."

“There was someone on the radio the other day saying murders were ever so simple, really, and the police ought to do something about it.”

“Naturally murder is simple, with weapons on all sides.” Miss Pettigrew sounded contemptuous. “Why writers of detective stories have to employ mysterious poisons or sealed rooms or blowpipes which I understand are not easily to be acquired even at a universal store like this one, when bricks, bread-knives, coal-hammers and pairs of scissors are to be had for the asking and are at least as efficacious, proves my contention that the average murderer is a very foolish fellow. What I intended to imply was diat concealment of crime is nothing so simple as these writers imagine.”

By now several of the waiting subscribers were frankly listening. The Old Party clearly had something, John Sherren decided. He had often heard this type of conversation before, and had always

remained completely unimpressed, but he felt that Miss Pettigrew not only believed in herself, but had the power to make other people believe in her also.

“No,” she continued, taking a book from the assistant’s hand and glancing at the last few pages, “murder is neither so easily conceived nor so successfully committed as these amateurs, these dabblers in criminology, would have one believe. If they were, I, like most people, should probably commit at least one murder.”

“You don’t expect us to believe that. Miss Pettigrew,” giggled the girl behind the counter, with the air of humoring an eccentric customer.

“No?” The old woman’s voice was as sharp as an icicle. “It may surprise you to hear that when I make statements I expect them to be accepted at their face value. You must have lived a singularly narrow or unobservant life if you cannot think of at least one person whom it would be a philanthropic act to destroy. I personally can think of two or three with no trouble at all.”

John Sherren was all this time rooted to the spot in a kind of horrified fascination. He didn’t like the old woman—but he was enthralled by her.

Miss Pettigrew then selected a book without any help or paying any attention to the assistant’s recommendation and moved away.

“She knows her own mind,” observed John to the girl behind the counter.

“She’s a character. She was a governess once and all I can say is,

thank goodness I was born in a time when people went to school."

"What was the name of the book whe brought back?"

"Say It With Blood." She produced a copy.

Then he remembered why he had come and asked about One Fair May Morning.

"It's not asked for much," said the girl, candidly.

John was touched to the quick. "It's rather above the heads of the multitude, I suppose," he suggested.

"Well, if you write to please yourself you can't expect people to pay for it, can you?" she argued reasonably. "Which did you want?"

"I think perhaps I'll take this." His grip on Say It With Blood tightened. "I've got a bit of a cold coming on and I may have to spent a day in bed."

He gave his name and address and went away with the book in his hand. He was vaguely troubled. He might pretend he didn't care what the public reaction to his work was, but the fact remained that if his sales didn't go up a bit he'd find himself without a publisher for his new work.

The day after he visited Garrods, John Sherren went to dine in Chelsea with some very distinguished people, who all wrote and painted to satisfy some inward urge and whose work was, of course, like his own, over the heads of the public. They lived comfortably on overdrafts and their artistic failures, and John was inclined to envy them. His private income, never very substantial, was now worth considerably less than it had been a few years earlier, and and though his salary at M.I.5. had been extremely helpful, that came to an end with the end of hostilities and the cost of living was rising all the time. As for his books, he was lucky if he broke even at the end of the year, when typing and stationery and postage were accounted for.

During dinner he took advantage of a lull in the conversation to speak of Miss Pettigrew, under the heading of Quaint Old Survivals.

"She comes out of the same era, though not precisely the same world, as my Aunt Clara," he observed. "She and this old penguin would make a splendid couple. They could be Blimps together, agreeing how radio had vulgarized the world."

"What did you say she was like?" inquired his hostess. "She sounds to me exactly like an old governess attached to my aunts—a Miss Pettigrew."

John looked up in amazement. “But that’s who she was. Talk about coincidence. We should never dare use that in our books. She looks a perfect gorgon, by the way.”

“All those old governesses were. They ruled every one with a rod of iron. I believe Granny had to ask for permission to enter her own schoolroom. Fancy her still being alive.”

“Alive and contemplating murder,” amended John.

“If she did, I’m sure she’d pull it off. I’d back her against the entire Home Office.”

That was the second time he heard her name, and, oddly enough, in the same connection—murder.

7

AFTER that John really did start his new book and worked at it with commendable zeal for about six weeks. Then he discovered he needed distraction and on the spur of the moment he decided to visit his last surviving relative. Miss Clara Bond. He made all his preparations with his normal spinsterish care; he booked a room at the Railway Hotel, and bought a first-class ticket and packed overnight and made a list of all the details he mustn't forget and ticked them off as he attended to them, and then destroyed the list in case someone else should find it. And then at the eleventh hour some tiresome fellow rang him up and he just lacked the necessary brutality to ring the fellow off. He was the assistant to his agent, and John wasn't sufficiently successful to be terse with agents. When at last the fellow rang off, John picked up his bag and hurried downstairs. He'd have to take a taxi now, which he couldn't really afford —he always traveled first class to Brakemouth to give the impression that he was doing pretty well—and he scanned the street nervously for a vacant one. When he reached the station he sprinted like mad for the platform, but even so the train was just beginning to draw out as he dashed past the ticket collector.

"Stand back there," roared the guard, but he didn't pay any heed. This was the only quick train of the day. He snatched at a door handle, twisted it and managed to hump himself and the bag inside the carriage, landing in an ungraceful tangle on the floor. When he pulled himself together he found his luck was altogether out. The train was by no means full but he hadn't been fortunate enough to pick an empty carriage. There was a woman sitting in the farther corner, barricaded by The Times, and giving the impression that the abrupt arrival of such a hobbledehoy as himself was beneath her notice. John seated himself in the corner farthest

away from her. He desired neither sympathy nor censure, and he nurtured the curiously old-fashioned notion diat for a single man to find himself alone for a long journey—this was a non-stop train for almost two hours —with a woman was to chance a fate worse than death. He saw, too, with rising disgust, that he was in a third-class carriage of the non-communicating variety, so he couldn't even walk through and find his proper place. No, he was stuck with this outrageous female until the next stop, which was, in fact, Brakemouth.

When it became clear that she was no more anxious to talk to him than he to her he calmed somewhat, and presently, pulling out his cigarette case, he decided to make the best of a bad job. He had just struck a match when a determined rather masculine voice said, "This is not a smoking compartment," an observation that shocked him so much that he let the match burn down and scorch his fingers before he could collect sufficient self-possession to say in a rather sarcastic voice, "Have you any objection to my smoking, madam?"

His companion's cue, seeing that she was talking to a gentleman, should have been, "Not at all," but she didn't seem to know any of the rules of the game.

"If I had none," said she frostily, "I should scarcely have selected a non-smoking carriage."

No sympathy, you perceive, no sweet reasonableness, no realization of a sensitive fellow-creature's absolute need for a cigarette at this hour of the morning. A spinster, he was convinced, and how lucky some chap, himself for example, was not to have married her.

"I almost missed the train," he said, "otherwise, of course, I should not have entered a non-smoking compartment."

The lady took no notice of this explanation. She was still entrenched behind The Times when the train ran out of the tunnel into which it had suddenly plunged. He was staring across at his companion, who had lowered the paper while they were in darkness.

It was Miss Pettigiew.

She looked through him and then, as though he had no existence, she laid The Times aside and produced a book from her hearty, shabby traveling bag. It had a bright orange cover and he recognized the series at once. Anger at this treatment of himself— for who was she, poor presuming faded female, to behave in so cavalier a manner to a published

novelist—made him break his rule to never getting into conversation with traveling companions.

and he inquired in bland tones: “I hope the book you have today is proving more satisfactory than its predecessor.”

She lifted her long face, topped by its hideous felt basin hat, and gave him an incredulous look.

“I beg your pardon?”

He had begun to feel better. “Say It With Blood, wasn’t it? I happened to be in Garrods when you were returning it. I hope you won’t think me impertinent (not that he cared, of course) if I say I agree with every word you said about it.”

“Ah, was that the occasion? I did not recall … Indeed, I had begun to wonder if the last time we met you were in fancy dress. I pride myself on never forgetting the face of an acquaintance.”

“A very improbable solution,” he acknowledged.

Miss Pettigrew laid aside her book and folded her long powerful hands. “The trouble is,” said she calmly, “that the convincing murderers don’t waste time writing about death, they set about the business in real earnest.”

That shook him a little, he had to confess. Perhaps, he thought, she was one of these unbalanced people who, whenever a crime is reported, ring up the police and claim responsibility. Or perhaps she really was a man-eater. He remembered with dismay that there were several tunnels between here and Brakemouth, that there were no stops, and one of the tunnels was exceedingly long. He also noticed that in that horrible hat she wore a long old-fashioned hatpin, and in detective stories of the twenties hatpins were not infrequently used as weapons of attack. However, he pulled himself together to sustain his side of the conversation.

“Yes, I suppose so,” he agreed. “I remember your saying on that occasion that if you could be certain of not being convicted you m.ight commit a murder yourself.”

“I dare say.” She was quite unmoved. “In fact, I am making this journey today in connection with a crime.”

“You mean, you are considering committing—but no, that’s absurd.”

“Has it never occurred to you that successful murders are often committed precisely for that reason, because people in general consider it would be absurd to suspect A or B of violence? However, I did not say I

was proposing to commit a murder. But I am convinced that a crime has been committed and I am, I fancy, being

asked down to prevent a second crime possibly of a similar nature. That is, of course, speculation."

"So you're going down to do the police's job for them?" said John with sudden brutal candor. "Why doesn't your friend, whoever she is (it didn't occur to him that it might be a man), go to the police direct?"

Miss Pettigrew shut up like a clam. "Really, that is her affair. Personally, if I am asked to confer a small favor, it does not occur to me to suggest to my friend that the police are paid for this purpose. Besides, there are occasions when a private individual may be of more use than the authorities."

John found himself reflecting that if he were the criminal in question he'd walk from the police fast enough, but if it were Miss Pettigrew in pursuit you wouldn't see him for dust.

"Perhaps you have suspicions?" he hinted.

"Hardly, since I am not yet on the scene. But I am a logical person. If I see a vase hurtle across a room, I look for the hand that flung it. If my house burns down and there has been no storm and I have no electricity on the premises, I look for some human agency at work. And if letters appear without a signature or even a stamp, I am not persuaded that they were delivered by some celestial or diabolical messenger. I am, on the contrary, convinced that they were written by someone in close contact with myself, and by a process of elimination and by using such wits as God has given me, I set about discovering the author."

John Sherren, reminding himself he was a published novelist and the speaker no more than an ex-governess who looked the part, pulled himself together.

"Lady Molly of Scotland Yard, I perceive," said he, politely. "Are you—if one may ask—making this journey in a professional capacity?"

She replied, with perfect composure: "My friend considers that she is in some danger from the writer of these unsigned letters, and she has asked me to give her my company and my assistance."

"When you say danger, do you imply violence?"

"That is what the writer of the letters appears to have done."

Some people have all the luck, thought John. He'd never even seen an anonymous letter himself. "And what reason … ?" he began delicately.

“Brakemouth is like every other place on the map,” snapped Miss Pettigrew. “People there are just as acquisitive as anywhere else, and if your neighbor has something you cannot afford or do not inherit, then what I understand is known as a jealousy complex is set up, and when this complex is sufficiently developed we may expect trouble in tangible form.”

It all sounded a bit highfalutin to her hearer. “So someone is jealous of your friend,” he simplified. “I remember meeting an ex-inspector of the Yard once. He told me that all crimes of violence, by which he meant murder, are committed for one of two reasons —passion and greed.”

“The majority are a mixture of the two,” said Miss Pettigrew, unbending slightly. “I am convinced they are in this case.”

“But your friend—I mean, why … ?”

“She recently sujffered a severe bereavement, a very close relative died in distressing circumstances.”

“I think I see.” John nodded intelligently. “X claims to believe that she knows more of the tragedy than she has chosen to reveal. Is it a matter of an inconvenient husband being conveniently removed?”

Miss Pettigrew’s face seemed to close up. Her eyes returned to the book open on her knee.

“Like myself,” she said, “my friend is a spinster.”

A sudden suspicion, so monstrous that he would not allow himself to contemplate it, floated like some enormous balloon filled with poisonous gas into John’s mind.

“This relation?” he compelled himself to ask. “A brother, perhaps? Or a sister?”

“A sister,” said Miss Pettigrew, and it seemed that the balloon was about to burst. “A woman of emotional make-up, easily alarmed, easily dominated. I need hardly say that no other person, so far as we know, attaches any suspicion to my friend …”

“So far as you know,” agreed John.

Miss Pettigrew’s face suddenly loomed up enormous, so that it seemed to fill half the carriage.

“May I ask what you mean by that?”

“Well, but you don’t know, I mean nobody knows. Perhaps half Brakemouth is saying the same thing.” He couldn’t imagine why he was being so reckless. The old woman annoyed him, that was all.

Miss Pettigrew continued to regard him as if he were some monster unexpectedly revealed under a flat stone. “How very singular!” she said, after a moment, and he felt an icy thrill run through him. He tried to say something hearty and amusing, just to show her he had been pulling her leg, but another glance assured him that no one would dare hint she even possessed such a limb.

“I suppose I’m going off my head. It’s the strain,” he told himself foolishly. Hurriedly he buried himself behind his paper, and they didn’t exchange another word until they drew up at Brake-mouth. But like a worm tunnelling in his brain went the question, “What did she mean by that—how very singular? Did it have some personal application? Does she guess?” Who he was, he meant, why he’d come? She was such an old witch, anything was possible.

At Brakemouth John moved half-heartedly toward the rack with a murmur about getting her bag down, but she said in that deep, unfeeling voice: “Thank you. A porter will attend to that,” so he picked up his own bag and scurried across to the Railway Hotel to dump it there. He called himself every kind of a fool, but all the same he wanted to get to Greenglades (that was the name of his Aunt Clara’s hotel) and make sure that his idiotic inspiration in the train had no foundation in fact. It was a relief to find that they had allotted him a quite good room at the Railway Hotel, and he tidied himself rapidly and then hurried down again. As he crossed the hall a man standing by the desk lifted his head and instantly dropped it again. He was a short, sturdy figure, wearing a suit of bright brown and a brown billycock hat, that he casually tilted over his face as he sauntered forward to watch which way the newcomer went. John was in such a hurry he noticed nothing. As he raised his arm to signal the only taxi in view, a porter came out and beat him by a couple of seconds. Behind the porter, like a figure of doom, came the detestable Miss Pettigrew. John looked around frantically, as though he expected another taxi to drop from the clouds. He didn’t notice a little red car standing by the gutter, and indeed in his present mood he wasn’t likely to notice anything so small and, at first sight, so primitive. The next instant the porter had ushered his bete noire into the taxi and was crossing to speak to him.

“Mr. Sherren?” he said. “The lady told me to say that if you’re going to Greenglades she can take you along with her.”

And, “Thanks, chum,” said Mr. Crook under his breath. “Now we know where we’re going.”

Sheepishly John accepted the offer.

“Well, Mr. Sherren,” said the dragon composedly, “I dare say I am right in thinking you are here for the same reason as myself—to visit Miss Bond. I noticed your name on your suitcase in the train.”

He tried to pass it off casually. “Yes, I’ve come down for a night or two. Not that I had heard from Aunt Clara that she was troubled about any anonymous letters, but—^you might call it telepathy, I suppose. I had a feeling something was wrong.”

“Really, Mr. Sherren? Very interesting. You feel something is wrong. I know she is in danger—in great danger.”

He couldn’t meet her eyes. She was a terrible woman. He wondered if her secret source of knowledge told her anything else, that he’d come down to carry out the threats in the anonymous letters and murder his Aunt Clara. It wouldn’t have surprised him in the least.

8

MISS BOND might be in peril of her life, but there was nothing to indicate that fact as she came forward into the lounge of Greenglades to greet her visitors. When she saw John her brows rose.

"My dear John, this is an unexpected pleasure. Or perhaps Miss Pettigrew has called you into conference."

"Not at all," said John, quickly. "We met quite by chance on the train."

"Traveling in the same carriage," amplified Miss Pettigrew. "An unexpected pleasure for me also."

"I am afraid your letter must have gone astray," Miss Bond continued. "However, as you are here, perhaps you can be of assistance. You call yourself a realist, I believe. I have something here real enough to make your hair stand on end—what's left of it." Smiling, she turned to Miss Pettigrew. "How are you, Frances?

You never seem to change. It was good of you to come so far for an old woman's whim."

She led the way into a small, cheerful, well-furnished sitting room. Miss Pettigrew looked around with interest.

"I was very fond of Isabel, as you know, Clara. I always thought if I were a man I should have wanted to marry her. She was so obviously the type that needs looking after. Pretty and fluffy and no brains at all, as Mr. Herbert puts it—or words to that effect. Dear me, Clara, is this your private sitting room?"

"I told the proprietor I had a friend coming down and should require privacy to discuss personal afiEairs, and he put this room at my disposal."

"I mentioned to your nephew, when I realized his identity, my object in coming down here today," acknowledged Miss Pettigrew. "Or shall I

say one of my objects? Do you mean, Clara, there have been more letters?"

"A truly significant one at last. Up to the present I had refused to take the matter seriously. The world is full of halfwitted people who think this sort of activity a joke."

"A joke in very poor taste, Clara, you will agree."

"My dear Frances, the taste of most people is deplorable. Here is the latest—effusion."

She opened her large black-velvet reticule and cast down a slip of paper on which was printed:

Make the most of your next birthday. Miss Bond. It will be your last.

"A definite threat, as you see."

"A climax, perhaps," amended Miss Pettigrew. "Have you the others, Clara, or did you think them beneath contempt?"

"I kept them, naturally. It is never possible to forecast how a matter like this will turn out. I have them here."

There were three notes leading up to the climax; all were roughly printed on cheap, lined paper, all were undated and unsigned. The first read:

This is her aniversary. How are you Reeling now?

and had arrived on the unfortunate Isabel's birthday. The second ran:

The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God. There shall no torment touch them.

The words "righteous" and "diere" were heavily underscored. Indeed, in one place the pen had actually penetrated the paper.

"When did these come?" inquired Miss Pettigrew, without looking up.

"I have no note of the exact dates. The first, of course, arrived on her birthday. The second came about a month later. Then there was a time-lag —I think that is the correct expression. Then—say two months later, came a third.

Do you remember how she hated the dark? It must be very dark where she is now.

"Surely that helps us," exclaimed John.

"In what way, may I inquire?"

"It proves that the letters aren't written by some malicious person out to make trouble, but by someone who did actually know Aunt Isabel. For instance, it would be easy for any one to know the approximate date of your birthday. Aunt Clara, because it was always a fete day. I always came down …"

"A fete indeed," murmured Miss Pettigrew ironically.

John ploughed on, pretending he hadn't heard. "A special cake was baked, and Stroud, who made it, always had it on show the day before. He liked to show what people could do even in wartime. But Aunt Isabel's birthday can only have been known to her own immediate circle."

"Let us get this quite clear, John," said Aunt Clara in a deceptively pleasant tone. "You suggest that I wrote these letters to myself?"

"Of course not." He sounded genuinely shocked.

"Then that eliminates one suspect. Now, who else could have the necessary information? There is yourself, of course, but then all the letters were left by hand, so that would involve your paying surprise visits to Brakemouth, and it is too much to believe that no one would have remarked a well-known novelist in our midst. That leaves—let me see—Locket. Or perhaps you and she had a pact."

"Aunt Clara, this is absurd." John found his voice with an effort. "Locket isn't even in Brakemouth now. She went to her brother in Wiltshire."

"That didn't last long. She was back in three months. The brother was marrying again."

"Within three months? Surely a scandal, my dear Clara."

"According to Locket it would have been more of a scandal if he hadn't married. But really, Frances, I cannot concern myself with the private lives of these people."

"Then she is actually in Brakemouth now?"

"I believe so."

"You must be sorry you left Seaview, aren't you?" Like any stoic of

old, John opened his breast to his adversary's spear. "I mean, it was because of Locket leaving that you felt you couldn't keep the house going."

Clara looked at him like a particularly vicious boa constrictor eyeing a particularly inferior rabbit.

"My dear John, your memory is lamentably short. I told you at the time that my sole reason for maintaining a house and a stafiE at considerable trouble and expense was on account of your Aunt Isabel. She would never have adapted herself to hotel life, but when at last—at last—I could consider my own interests, I was thankful to be able to shelve all that responsibility and leave the management of a household to others. As for Locket, I should not dream of re-employing her even if she asked to come back. The way she went around after my sister died, talking about the house being haunted, hearing voices and Isabel crying at the windows— sheer hysteria, and so I told her. Really, I can hardly blame her brother if he did marry again at injudiciously short notice. It was like having a madwoman in the house. Pull yourself together. Locket, I told her, or you'll end up in an asylum."

"She was very fond of Aunt Isabel," John protested.

"Are you suggesting / was not fond of her? If you knew the sac* rifices I have made all my life, first my father, then you as a helpless child abandoned by your parents—no, John, no argument if you please—and then all those years my sister, who was manifestly incapable of managing her own life. Oh, Frances, I know you were prepared to relieve me of that burden, but it was impossible. No one but I knew how it must be carried, I and my father who left me Isabel as part of his legacy on his death-bed. As for Locket, when I heard she was back I recommended her to Lady Trevanion, who, I knew, was looking for a housekeeper. She's not perfect, I

told her, but which of them is? At least she's clean and honest, and she doesn't ask the outrageous wages of these young women with their hair flying on their shoulders and fingernails looking as though they'd been dipped blood. But would Locket go? Dear me, no. She had tasted independence. She was never going to live in again. She 'obliges,' I understand, a number of residents, but really I can tell you nothing definite about her. Do I understand you to suggest that she may have written these letters?"

"It's a possibility, Clara," said Miss Pettigrew, in her deep voice. "She had the necessary knowledge—about Isabel's fear of the dark, for instance. All her friends were aware of it, but would a stranger be likely to know?"

"My point precisely," chimed in John eagerly, feeling himself one of that blessed band of brothers of whom Peter Wimsey and Albert Campion are shining lights.

"Locket might talk, she was a great chatterbox. And then Isabel was highly indiscreet. She had an unfortunate habit of entering into conversations with strangers in omnibuses or in shelters on the sea-front. That was one reason why I was not anxious for her to go out alone. No one knows what she may not have said."

"The word anniversary is spelt with a single 'n' which might argue an illiterate person. The printing, I dare say, is deliberately malformed. If the writer is someone known to yourself …"

"I doubt if you can go much my the spelling," demurred John, "Plenty of fellows with a Varsity education might spell anniversary that way."

"A great pity their parents wasted their money, if that's so," said Clara. "You, of course, would not make that mistake, John, except deliberately."

"As for maniacs," continued John in dogged tones, "plenty of them take to religion, which could explain the text from the Bible."

"So we are now assuming that the letters are written by a religious maniac? That considerably enlarges the field."

"One thing that strikes me as odd," for once John did not intend to be deflated by his alarming relative, "is that so far there's been no talk of blackmail. What, then, is the motive behind the letters?"

"That surely is obvious. I am being warned that I am in danger.

The last letter, at all events, constitutes a threat against my life."

"And the motive?"

Miss Pettigrew took up the tale. "It occurs to me that there may be a soupgon of truth underlying all this melodrama. For instance we are all aware of the coroner's verdict, but did it never pass through your mind, Clara, as I must admit it did through mine, that perhaps Isabel's death was not an accident?"

"You mean that she deliberately threw herself off the balcony? But

that is absurd. John here will tell you that only a few days before this tragedy she was in the highest of spirits."

"Ah, but that was a few days earlier. Supposing something had happened?"

"What should happen?"

"You were not in her confidence?"

"She told me nothing that has any bearing on her sudden death."

"And you, Mr. Sherren?" Miss Pettigrew turned smartly on him.

"As I told Aunt Clara at the time, she gave me the impression she had made some new friendship. I can think of nothing else that would have made her so happy, or caused her to speak as she did about life being worthwhile after one had given up hope. And if anything had happened to—to crash that friendship, she might have felt desperate …" He paused, letting the silence finish the sentence for him.

"I agree with your nephew, Clara," intoned Miss Pettigrew. "Shortly before her death I also received a letter from Isabel that was, in the words of the poet, fired with hope. The next news I had was that she was dead. But for an unfortunate attack of influenza I should naturally have attended the funeral, but business affairs have kept me in town ever since."

"I noticed you had not visited Brakemouth since receiving the news," acknowledged Miss Bond with an acid smile. "Now, Frances, I should not say this unless Isabel were dead, but we can do her no harm now. Her whole life was one long series of hopes and disillusionments. She was perpetually making new and often quite unsuitable friendships on which she pinned the most absurd hopes. She had, as you know, a nature at once romantic and uncontrolled, and she could not visualize a normal end to any of these casual acquaintanceships. A man had only to raise his hat to her for her to begin planning what she would wear at the wedding. Yes, John, that is true. I have had more trouble in the past than you have any conception of. She had a way of suggesting she possessed ample means, and she would give quite disproportionate sums to congenital beggars. Any one with a hard-luck story could engage her sympathies, and persons of that susceptible temperament are bound to be deceived again and again. As I told you just now, she had not confided in me, but when these baseless hopes of hers came to nothing, as was perpetually the case, she would be plunged into an abyss of despair, from which she only rose to clutch at some fresh acquaintanceship, some fantastic day-dream which

could never, in reason, be translated into reality. It was because he knew of this instability of hers that my father left his money as he did. Any unscrupulous person could have taken advantage of Isabel, and she might long ago have figured in one of these melodramatic criminal cases had she not had someone to look after her. I don't say she was definitely unbalanced, but her balance was so delicate that she could never have managed her own life. And although naturally I have heard whispers as to the correctness of the verdict, I question whether any one so timid about heights would have chosen that way out."

"Timid people are often desperate people," said John in a worldly-wise manner. "They may act on impulse …"

"In any case, I see no sense in reopening this sad affair," snapped Miss Bond.

"It is not left to you to reopen it," returned Miss Pettigrew coolly. "The author of these," she laid her long yellow finger on the anonymous letters, "clearly does not intend to let the matter rest. Had you thought of turning these over to the police?"

"Of course I have thought of it. It would be exhilarating to get some return for the exorbitant taxes we are called upon to pay. But surely you see the impossibility of such a course? If you and I and John here can suspect suicide, the police would be far more definite, and I cannot have dear Isabel's memory smirched by such a suggestion made publicly. And I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that during those last weeks my sister's attitude was painfully reminiscent of other occasions when she was, as it were, working up for a climax. Still, she was a woman fully grown, and at her age one looks for common sense."

"On the contrary," contradicted Miss Pettigrew, "hers was a very dangerous age."

Miss Bond rose and walked over to the window. "We are like people going around in circles," she said. "My real reason in inviting you here, Frances, is to ensure that you know the facts, and if the writer of these miserable effusions attempts to put his or her threats into force, you can communicate the truth to the police."

"My own reading of the letters," said Miss Pettigrew, "is that the writer means to apply the screw until he or she considers you in a sufficient state of—dither is, I believe, the word—to pay blackmail as the price of silence."

"You are talking nonsense," said Miss Bond contemptuously. "The greatest optimist cannot demand blackmail without some tangible weapon in the shape of documents or some kind of evidence, and I can assure you both that no such documents exist. Nor is any person in possession of information that could form a ground for such an illegal demand."

"Perhaps he thinks you're made of the same stuff as Aunt Isabel, and because she could be intimidated the same holds good for you."

"In that case, he or she is certainly going to be disappointed," announced Clara, sweeping the four bits of paper together and stuffing them back into her capacious bag in which she carried practically all her portable property, from her gold pencil to her sleeping tablets and sweet ration. She trusted no one, not even Miss Pettigrew or John, if the truth were known. "No, I shall await further developments. And now I believe I hear the luncheon gong. I had warned the management I should have one guest, but I dare say they will be able to support one more."

Having made her nephew feel his lack of an invitation, she marched ahead of them into the dining room.

"It is just as well to be on the early side," she explained. "Otherwise some of these ancient vultures, who live only for their stomachs and their bridge, will sweep the board before we can secure a mouthful for ourselves."

After lunch Clara and Miss Pettigrew settled down to one of those interminable afternoons apparently beloved of women, each pulling out a memory like an old dance program or a pair of satin

shoes. John endured it for a while, and then showed signs of restiveness.

"You are anxious about your train, John?" inquired Clara maliciously.

"As a matter of fact I'm not going back to town tonight. I need a few days' change—a bit run down, I fancy—and the air's good here and once I get back to my book I shan't be able to knock oflF at all. I'm putting up at the Railway Hotel."

"Very noisy, I understand," said Clara, with satisfaction. "But a great opportunity for you to observe your fellow-creatures. So essential for a realistic novelist, I always think."

"I hope if there's anything more I can do to help you, you'll let me know," he said.

“And, of course, if I am found with my throat cut, you will be on the spot to assist the police.”

“I understand they consider that very suspicious,” returned John, and was instantly aware of both ladies regarding him in a very peculiar manner. Hurriedly explaining that this was a joke, John got himself out of the room. He didn’t like the situation at all. At the reception desk he asked for the number of his aunt’s room; he said he wanted to send in a few flowers. They told him No. 12— no difficulty about it at all.

9

JOHN SHERREN had not asked his aunt for Locket's address, partly because she probably wouldn't have given it to him in any case, and partly because she would have wanted to know if he meant to visit the old woman, and, if so, why? Knowing from experience that she always wormed the facts out of him, he had had the sense to keep his mouth shut, and for once he thought she had given away more than he. When he was young he had often sought Locket's company in preference to that of his aunts and their friends, as being more lively and altogether more rewarding, so he had often met her particular cronies. The chief of these was a Mrs. Pearson, owner of a villa called Sandringham in a turning off the parade, and he remembered hearing her say on a number of occasions: "If ever you want to claim your independence, May, you come along to me. There'll always be a room for you in my house." So now he bent his steps toward Marine Villas, knowing that even if Locket wasn't lodging there he would get some information as to her whereabouts. He recognized the house at once by the misshapen china cat wearing a yellow boater, also made of china, peeping between the windown curtains, and when he rang the bell Locket herself opened the door.

She seemed surprised and, at first, a little suspicious. "Why, Mr. John, I didn't know you were coming down."

"Nor did Aunt Clara. A surprise package for every one." He smiled genially. He had always been at home with Locket. "And you're a surprise package for me, too. I thought you were in Wiltshire."

"My brother's married that trollop," said Locket, who had never minced her words, "and it wasn't to be expected I should stay in the house after that. Mind you, they wanted me, the baby coming, and all. You should have thought of that earlier, I told them. I suppose you've

seen Miss Bond?"

"Yes. She's getting anonymous letters. Locket."

He watched her intently. For a minute the old woman didn't speak. Then she said: "You know what they say about the mills of God."

"What exactly does that mean?"

"You'd best come in, Mr. John." He followed Locket into a room that looked like something from a stage set, everything so true to life it had a theatrical effect. "It's about Miss Isabel, I suppose," Locket continued, pushing John toward a basket-work chair and taking a rocker herself.

"So you thought there was some hanky-panky there?"

"I've got eyes and ears like others, and more opportunity of using them," was Locket's dry retort. "Well, did you believe it was an accident?"

"No," said John, after a moment's pause. "I could believe suicide—or murder …"

"Murder?"

"I said I could believe it—more easily than accident."

"I'll lay you didn't say that to your Aunt Clara."

"I don't want to be served with a writ for defamatory libel. What's your view. Locket?"

"I think when a body's stopped having anything to look forward to, they don't see any sense in going on."

"So you plump for suicide." He held out his cigarette case. "Do you smoke, Locket?"

"When I'm off duty, I do. Yes, Mr. John, that's my view, and if you'd been in the house those last few days you'd think the same."

"Don't keep me in suspense, Locket, What happened during those three days to drive Aunt Isabel to suicide?"

Locket pulled deliberately at her cigarette for a moment. Then she said: "Being able to take charge is very good, no doubt, if you don't let it override you. Then you're as much of a slave to your methods as the rest of the world. I've seen some managing people in my time, but none to equal Miss Clara. The way she'd come down of a morning, saying, 'It's another wet day,' her face all curling up as if to add, 'Of course, if it had been me planning the world I wouldn't have had any wet weather at all.' She got used to having her own way and then she couldn't bear to be

crossed. It began with the Colonel. He wanted to marry again, and much better for everybody if he had. There was a very nice lady, a widow, who was taken with him and him with her. A nice-looking, well-dressed person she was, with a bit of money, too. But Miss Clara stopped it somehow. You don't recall the Colonel, of course, but there was something—sapped—about him. Pruning may be all very well in the time and season, but if every time a tree throws out a new shoot you get out your scissors and snip it off, pretty soon the tree's going to die."

"And that's what Aunt Clara did?"

"All the time. First the Colonel and afterwards Miss Isabel."

"I've always wondered she didn't marry."

"She didn't marry because Miss Clara didn't mean her to. To begin with, she persuaded the Colonel to tie up his money away from her sister."

"How did she persuade him to do that? I always thought Aunt Isabel was his favorite, from die scraps of gossip I heard and was able to put together."

"So she was, but the two of them together weren't a match for

Miss Clara. As for the money, that was after the affair of Mr. Thomas. Mr. Thomas was a young gentleman Miss Isabel fancied. I don't say he was anything special to look at, and he'd never end up in the House of Lords, but he was Miss Isabel's choice. She didn't want anyone showy—she wasn't the showy kind. When Miss Clara heard about it she was livid. She didn't want any of them to get away from her, you see,"

"A power complex," murmured John.

"It might be partly that, but it was the money, too. You must have noticed how careful she is about money. Miss Isabel was just the other way. You can't take it with you, she used to say. Sometimes when she came in with something she'd fancied I'd see Miss Clara's face. 'You're not fit to be trusted with money,' she'd tell her. 'Somebody had to earn that with the sweat of their brow.' But to my mind if somebody else gets pleasure spending it, then it was worth earning."

"I never knew that, about the money, I mean, till after the funeral. Poor Aunt Isabel. It must have cramped her style considerably." He brooded a moment. "What's all this about Mr. Thomas? I never heard of him."

"It was so long ago. Over thirty-five years. As for him, he's probably

still at St. Albans. He came to Brakemouth for a holiday, and he and Miss Isabel got acquainted and he wanted to marry her and take her back with him, but Miss Clara said it wasn't to be thought of that her sister should marry a clerk, which is all Mr. Thomas was. But what I say is, why not let somebody be happy? They were both the timid kind, didn't want a lot of flummery."

"And Aunt Clara broke that up? What about her father, though?"

"He couldn't stand up to her. He'd have been married himself if he could. And then this Mr. Thomas wasn't anything much to look at. Though, mind you, he fought for her. Came down to see the old gentleman and wrote every day—why, they planned to run away together but Miss Clara found out, and she played her sister a very dirty trick. She sent a telegram signed with Mr. Thomas's name saying he was changing his plans and she wasn't to come that day, and she sent another to Mr. Thomas signed with her sister's name saying she wasn't coming after all. Poor Miss Isabell It quite broke her up, being thrown over, as she thought.

and when Mr. Thomas came around saying he'd got to see her, she was in bed with a fever and she couldn't see anyone."

"But if he wrote. Locket . . ,"

"He did, of course, but it wasn't Miss Isabel that saw the letters. And then, poor gentleman, he had to go back to St. Albans. Things were different in those days; you didn't take french leave, not unless you wanted to lose your employment, and once he was back at St. Albans it was easy for Miss Clara to spirit her sister away to a convalescent home and write that she never wanted to hear Mr. Thomas's name again. Oh, he never had a chance from the beginning, and so I could have told him. His father had been a clerk in the same business and his mother was a nursery governess before her marriage. It wasn't to be thought of that he'd be let marry Miss Isabel."

"And that was the end of him?" John was fascinated by what seemed to him a quite appalling story. But what depths of subtlety it revealed in the surviving sister.

"So far as Miss Isabel was concerned. I dare say he married someone in his own walk of life. But it was a long time before she got over it, poor lady."

"But, Locket," he urged, "you aren't asking me to believe that because of something that happened thirty-five years ago Aunt Isabel

pitched herself off a balcony?"

"Not thirty-five years," conceded Locket grimly. "Nearer thirty-five weeks."

"You mean, history repeated itself? There was a second Mr. Thomas?"

"Only his name was Marlowe."

"And that's why she was so excited the last time I saw her. I knew she'd discovered a new interest. But—how did she expect it to end?"

"Mr. Marlowe expected it to end in marriage, till he heard what Miss Clara had to say. Oh, yes, she found out. Saw them saying good-bye one evening. It was after she had pneumonia that spring, and the doctor sent a nurse. That gave Miss Isabel some time off and she used to go for long walks along the front, and one day she met this Mr. Marlowe. Oh, I suppose there are plenty like him in all seaside resorts, a handsome face run to seed, came of a nice family, I shouldn't wonder, but something wrong somewhere. Like

the odd pup of a litter, that isn't quite up to scratch. It wasn't quite like history repeating itself. Mr. Thomas was really taken with Miss Isabel."

"And Mr. Marlowe more with what he thought Aunt Isabel had?"

"That's about the size of it. Oh, she was infatuated, Mr. John, there's no other word. He was on the look-out for someone like her, a nice, easy-going lady, not too young, with a bit of money. The Sunday papers used to be full of such stories before they stopped printing them and spoilt everybody's fun."

"You'd think they'd have more sense," suggested John.

She flashed around on him. "Why should they? What have they had —^what had Miss Isabel ever had—to make her careful of her life or think it was worth saving? Of course, there's no knowing if he had a wife somewhere, and she'd never think to ask, just like a person who's been half-starved doesn't stop to know if the bun you give them has been paid for. Oh, to her it was her last chance. That man could have done anything with her. Any man could, who took the trouble, and he was a gentleman born, and knew how to talk. I know. I heard him talking to Miss Clara."

"You mean, she stopped this, too?"

"Of course she stopped it. A blind man would have noticed the change in Miss Isabel. Miss Clara didn't find any letters, because Mr.

Marlowe had too much sense to write any, but it wasn't difficult for her to find out what was going on. And what was going on was that Miss Isabel was planning to come up to London with Mr. Marlowe and get married on the sly. She'd been saving for years in a post-office book, one thing she did manage to keep from her sister, and she was going to take out all the money and take it up to London and get married. Mr. Marlowe had told her he was waiting to hear the result of a lawsuit, and he didn't think he ought to marry her till he knew it was going to be all right."

"And, of course, that won her completely."

"Of course it did. Oh, I dare say Mr. Marlowe had told the story so often he could tell it in his sleep. Then Miss Clara found out where he was staying and she wrote and asked him to come and see her one morning when Miss Isabel was going to the dentist."

"So that's how you know what he was like and what he said."

"Yes. There's a door behind the curtain in the drawing room

leads onto the veranda, and if that door's a mite open and a body's standing behind it, that body doesn't miss much. Oh, it was the same old story. Her sister had confided to her that she was going to London to be married, and there was no need for secrecy, but did Mr. Marlowe understand she wasn't quite like other people—this had happened before—but if he was really fond of her. Miss Clara wouldn't stand in the way if Mr. Marlowe could keep her. That was a facer for our fine gentleman. Of course. Miss Isabel had given the impression she had money of her own, and so she had, but nothing like as much as Mr. Marlowe had thought, and not enough to make the game worth the candle, not with a proper religious ceremony marriage. Mind you, the way Miss Clara told it, making it sound as though she'd given up her life to looking after her sister, you couldn't blame any man for wanting to back out, quite apart from the money. After all if Miss Isabel had delusions about being a rich woman when really she had practically nothing, she might have other delusions on other subjects."

"And I suppose after that you couldn't see Mr. Marlowe for dust?"

"I must say he got out of it very neatly," acknowledged Locket in grudging tones. "He said he was afraid Miss Isabel had been a little previous. He didn't deny that he was fond of her, but he was waiting to hear the result of a lawsuit. If, as he hoped, it went in his favor, then he would come down and take her away, but if it wasn't in his favor, then he

didn't feel he had the right to ask her to marry him. He even said something about a man not liking to live on his wife's money."

"Was there a lawsuit?"

"I couldn't say. He gave out it was something to do with his first marriage. He had been married very young and when it broke up he made over nearly everything he had—he was a rich man in those days, according to himself—to her. But now she was dead and her heirs were trying to make out that all the money was theirs. I didn't rightly understand it all, but it seems that he was left some more money after the break-up, and his wife's lawyers were trying to make out that that was covered by the first agreement. You'd understand better than I do, Mr. John …"

"Since there probably wasn't any money I don't suppose it matters," returned John gloomily.

"Anyway, he had to go up to London and he asked if he could leave a note for Miss Isabel."

"What did it say?"

"I never saw it, and if you ask me, Mr. John, Miss Isabel never saw it either. Miss Clara saw her when she came in and what she said to her I couldn't tell you, but it was that night …"

"That she fell from the balcony?"

"Yes."

"And did Marlowe come back?"

"Never Miss Clara said she wrote to him, but again I don't know. Maybe he never meant to come back, and found something more worth his while up in London."

"From all you've told me, Locket, my aunt seems to have done Aunt Isabel a good turn by stopping that marriage. Your Mr. Marlowe sounds as if he were in the true George Joseph Smith tradition."

"Oh, I don't think he was the murdering kind. I think when he'd got everything out of her, he'd have left her flat. Still, even so she'd have had something. But if Miss Clara told her he'd come to find out about the money and when he learnt she hadn't got any he didn't think she was worth troubling about …"

"But she had got money, Locket, she had. I took the trouble to look up Colonel Bond's will once, and if Aunt Isabel married she was to have half whatever was left of the fortune. I suppose Aunt Clara never let her

know that."

Locket's face was a study. "It's to be hoped Providence follows its own advice and repays fourfold," she said, and now her voice was choked with grief and rage. "Of course Miss Clara had to make sure that Miss Isabel didn't find out. She'd never think of looking up the will …"

"But Marlowe might. And he never came back?"

"It wouldn't have been any use. Miss Isabel was dead."

"If that had come out at the inquest we might have got a very diflEerent verdict. Or rather, things might have been damned unpleasant for Aunt Clara. A lot of people who aren't geniuses know how to add two and two together. Locket, what happened to Marlowe?"

"Making up to some other poor lady at this minute, I shouldn't wonder."

&4 DeathKnocksThreeTimes

"Does it ocrur to you," asked John, slowly, "that perhaps he's writing the anonymous letters?" Another thought struck him. "Did Aunt Isabel leave a letter that night?"

"If she did I never saw it."

The same thought was in both their minds. If Isabel had left a letter her sister was perfectly capable of destroying it.

"So that's really why you left, not because of your brother?"

"Seeing I hadn't seen Thomas for twelve years, it's not to be expected I'd change my whole way of living for him, and risk my future, come to that. For Miss Clara always said if I stayed I shouldn't be forgotten when I was past work. Not that I put my faith in that," she added, cynically. "Still, she didn't stop in the house long herself. P'raps she found it haunted, too. I tell you, Mr. John, I'd as lief stop on with a man-eating tiger as stay at Seaview. Oh, I dare say the police can't touch her, but what you said just now was right. It's murder if ever there was one, and I only hope that one day her ladyship'll be brought to account."

"You make my blood run cold. Locket. By the way, did you ever meet a female gorgon called Pettigrew?"

"Miss Pettigrew?" Locket's voice was warm with curiosity. "You don't mean she's popped up again?"

"I never seem to have heard of her."

"She was Isabel's friend. Miss Isabel, I should say. Very thick they were at one time. Some plan of setting up together, I believe, but nothing

came of it. No money, you see. So now Miss Clara's got her claws into that one, too. She never could abide Miss Isabel having anything of her own. Wonder what Miss P. wants."

"As usual. Locket, it's what Aunt Clara wants."

"And diis time it's what?"

"Help and comfort. She's frightened. Locket, probably for the first time in her life. Hitherto all her dangers have taken a concrete form. She could see them and she knew how to deal with them. This is different. She's in the dark, and she hates it. Oh, I tell you, she may not admit it to me, but she's afraid."

"A change for her," said Locket, composedly.

"Yes. In a way, it's terrifying. She always gave one the impression of being invulnerable. But even she has her heel of Achilles."

"Nice to know even she can be human," said Locket.

John looked at her sharply. He thought if he were Aunt Qaia he would take the advice he had himself ofiEered and go away te some safe place like London, where she could be as anonymous as her alarming correspondent.

10

AT ALMOST the same moment Miss Bond was saying to Miss Pettigrew, "My dear Frances, I asked you down here not merely for your advice, for, apart from suggesting I might approach the police, I fail to see what you could propose that had not already occurred to me, but for the benefit of your support. I told you just now I was afraid. That is true, and it is a new sensation for me. I don't like it. And there is another point. We've already agreed that X must have known Isabel well; a number of details point to that. But he must also have known me well. I used to think I had become pretty—tough, I believe, is the word. I had to fight my father's battles and then Isabel's—but this policy of secret intimidation is unnerving. It's not only the letters, not only that I am beginning to dread going into the hall, in case there is another of these obscene envelopes waiting for me; it's more than that. For instance, twice recently I have been called to the telephone. When I have taken up the receiver a voice has said, 'Miss Bond? Still there? Good,' and rung off again."

"A man's voice or a woman's?"

"It is difficult to say. Clearly a disguised voice. It is all part of a scheme to make my life intolerable."

"Perhaps," Miss Pettigrew agreed. "That shows that whoever is behind this tyranny has intelligence. You always found suspense hard to bear, didn't you? If you had to see the dentist you must go at once. If you objected to something someone had said, you couldn't wait for the next morning, by which time everybody would have forgotten the paltry little insult; you must seize the cudgels at once. If you decided you couldn't endure this situation any longer you would swallow a bottle of aspirin or stab yourself with a bread-knife or whatever seemed to you best, without stopping to realize that that is perhaps what X wishes you to do."

"My dear Frances, you are very strange today. And, in any case, as a religious woman I could not consider taking my own life in any circumstances. I wonder why you choose this evening to say these extraordinary things to me?"

"Because, although a good many other people have been saying even more extraordinary things, you haven't heard them. There are disadvantages, my dear Clara, in being a superior person. If you were ever to be found gossiping at an Olde English Tea Shoppe at eleven o'clock or outside the post office, you might realize that a third explanation has been freely offered for Isabel's death, an explanation that is neither accident nor self-destruction. A number of people think she may have died because she had nothing left to live for. Others," she wound up deliberately, "think she may have died to suit someone else's book."

Miss Bond was very white, but her tone was incredulous and haughty as she said: "That can only imply murder. I cannot believe, Frances, that any one could be wicked enough to suggest such a thing. Who, may I ask, is being—tipped is the word, is it not?—as the criminal? Locket? or myself?"

"It is difficult to see what benefit Locket would derive from Isabel's death. Every one knows she was devoted …"

"I see. And can anyone explain how I should benefit by such a death?"

"I believe it is a fact, Clara, that if Isabel married, half your father's fortune would go to her?"

Miss Bond stiffened. "Did Isabel tell you that?"

"I don't even know if she knew. I was at some pains to examine the will when I was at Somerset House on other business some time ago …"

"I see. Spying on me. I hardly expected that of you, Frances. It seems there is no one I can trust."

Miss Pettigrew remained quite unmoved. "Isabel was my greatest friend. As you know, at one time I hoped we might set up an establishment together, but that proved impossible."

"It was quite out of the question. I think I made it clear at the time that Isabel required constant care. You would have been out at your work all day. Then, too, there was the question of means.

Oh, I know what you are going to say. I could have made her an allowance out of my own income, but I do not feel that any such

arrangement would have been approved by my father. The money was left to me specifically to make a home for my sister, and no one can deny that I have spent all my life in the service of my nearest and dearest. The most malicious cannot accuse me of neglecting them."

"On the contrary," pointed out Miss Pettigrew, "that is precisely what someone is doing. The letters may be anonymous, but there was nothing vague about the accusations."

Miss Bond once again reared her head. "I refuse to treat such communications seriously," she flamed.

"Very unwise of you, Clara. Oh, I know from experience the futility of trying to persuade you to change your mind, but there is one rather peculiar factor about these letters. As a rule, threats lead up to blackmail, to a demand for money. There is no such hint in any of these letters. The significance of that has, surely, not escaped you."

"Blackmail, my dear Frances, if you insist on using such an unpleasant word, can only be levied where there is concrete evidence to support the demand. Documents, letters, confessions, which it may be worth the while of the person receiving the threats to buy in. In this case no such documents exist. These letters are sheer blufIf."

"In that case," murmured Miss Pettigrew, "it seems a waste of every one's time to send them. Oh, I know malicious half-wits have been known to terrorize a whole village with this sort of activity, but personally I cannot believe the letters are an end in themselves. You see, the one threat that is made is that you personally are in danger, your life actually is in danger. Ergo—-these letters are either written by a moron, a moron with unusual knowledge of Isabel, and it should be simple to identify the writer, or else they mean what they say. The writer may be the woman at the next table at this hotel, the person sitting in the same shelter on the parade or standing behind you in the bus queue, and this last is a very strong attacking position. No, Clara, in your case I should unhesitatingly go to the police. If you will not take that advice …"

"You are wasting your breath, Frances. It is impossible for me to

go to the police. I cannot brand Isabel as the slightly unbalanced person we know she was …"

"And lend color to the theory that she took her own life? So that is what you really believe? No, she said nothing in any letter to me to support such a theory. In fact I agree with your nephew. Just before her

regrettable accident she was in unusually good spirits. However, if you refuse to adopt the sensible course, there is nothing to be done but await events. Incidentally, do you like flowers at funerals or do you prefer the modern method of sending subscriptions to a particular charity?"

Miss Bond could endure it no longer. "I really do not understand, Frances, why you troubled to come down. You clearly intend to make matters even worse …"

"I am trying to convince you, Clara, that the situation can hardly be worse. There are probably quite a number of insignificant people whose very names would convey nothing to you …"

"Who would like to do me actual damage? My dear Frances, your imagination does you credit, but I can hardly believe any of them can be interested to the point of risking their lives for the «ake of a—prejudice, shall we say?"

"My dear Clara, if anything unfortunate should happen to you I shall feel it my duty at the subsequent inquest to ask for a verdict of suicide."

Miss Bond rose. "I regard your remarks as being in the most execrable taste," she said in a dignified voice. "I think it is time for tea."

"I could do with my tea," agreed Frances Pettigrew, quite unmoved.

As they came into the hall someone was sorting a bunch of letters that had just arrived. Miss Bond hesitated, then turned resolutely toward the large drawing room where tea was served.

"Shall I stay and see if there is anything for you?" offered her detestable companion.

Miss Bond swept by without a word. But when Miss Pettigrew joined her she was carrying three envelopes.

"Two by the post," she announced cheerfully. "The third was left by hand. It was found on the mat during the afternoon. So that proves one thing: That your enemy is on the spot. Are you

quite sure, Clara, you won't go to town for a little and see the sights?"

It was the usual envelope, the usual cheap paper, the usual illiterate scrawl. It said:

This is the last you're going to get, Miss Bond. You've come to the end, too.

Arthur Crook walked through the prosperous seaside community of Brakemouth with his bowler hat over his eyes, and his large, competent hands linked behind his back, in the fond belief that he looked exactly like every other tripper and therefore, being part of the scene, was invisible. The fact that he was not a tripper but had come down on business he had just concluded, he chose to ignore. On the cliffs near the end of the town he saw a woman standing, a tall woman dressed in a rather shapeless coat. Her skirt was long and her hat had a flat brim, but all the same she didn't contrive to have the New Look. She peered down at the beach and the rocks, which were now clearly visible, and moved a step nearer the edge. In a flash, though he didn't appear to quicken his steps. Croak was at her side.

"I wouldn't, lady," he said, earnestly. "Really, I wouldn't."

She turned her pale unyielding face toward him. She looked like someone in a restaurant rejecting a dish on the ground that she ate neither horse nor whale.

"Anyhow," amended Mr. Crook, hurriedly, "not for about four hours. The tide's wrong."

"If you imagine that I am going to throw myself into the sea to oblige Miss Bond, you are mistaken," said Miss Pettigrew, coolly.

"Would it?" asked Crook. "Oblige her, I mean?"

"You are, perhaps, acquainted with Miss Bond?" Her tone was as chilly as the sea.

"Me, lady? Not yet. I don't go putting my head into lions' mouths till someone makes it worth my while. But you might say I was interested in an economical sort of way. I mean, I saw you out a few days back with young Lochinvar."

Miss Pettigrew stiffened. "If you are referring to Mr. Sherren, I hardly consider that a very apposite comparison."

"Comes out of the West," said Mr. Crook, "West-End anyhow. North West-End," he amended.

"A friend of yours?"

"You might say he was a fellow-victim."

"How very interesting. I should hardly have thought your orbit and his would have crossed at any angle."

"Not his fault," said Crook, earnestly. "We happened to be witnesses at the same inquest."

"Inquest?" Her tone changed sharply. "You are not referring to his aunt, Miss Isabel Bond?"

"To his uncle, name of Sherren. Lived in the Moated Grange in the north, and passed out inconsiderately as soon as little Johnny got back to town."

"Really," reflected Miss Pettigrew. "That is more interesting still. A wealthy gentleman?"

"Depends on your standards," said Mr. Crook, simply.

"Wealthy by John Sherren's standards?"

"Could be," acknowledged Crook.

"And was Mr. Sherren the heir?"

"As it turned out—no. The faithful lackey scooped the kitty."

"A shock to the nephew?"

"As to that I didn't ask him, but it could be there was a little disappointment."

"And the verdict?"

"Death by misadventure."

Miss Pettigrew permitted herself a small wintry smile. "And there are those who question the dictum that history repeats itself."

"Now you spill the beans," Crook invited her. "This Miss I. Bond—she a relation?"

"On his mother's side, one of the only two remaining. The survivor is her sister. Miss Clara Bond, on whose account both Mr. Sherren and myself are here at the present time. Misfortune makes strange bedfellows, does it not?"

"And—let's get this straight" (Crook was nothing if not direct) "you think there may be a third inquest on the horizon?"

"It would be a strange coincidence, would it not, Mr… ."

"Crook's the name. Arthur Crook. Business address 123 Bloomsbury Street. If you should feel inclined to conk John Sherren on the head with fatal results and come to me, I can show you were at Newcastle-on-Tyne on the day in question."

"A disciple of Mr. Maskelyne, Mr. Crook?"

"A bit more expensive. What was the verdict on Miss I. Bond?"

"Death by misadventure. She fell off a balcony that he apparently had warned her was defective."

"A lady of means?" hinted Crook.

"So long as she remained a spinster her means were very limited. Had she married at any time she would have inherited half her father's fortune, which I believe was a quite considerable one."

"And Sister protected her from fortune-hunters? I get you. And now Sister's all by herself in the house?"

"Oh, they gave up the house. For one thing, the old servant left, and for anodier Miss Bond thought it would be too large for a single lady."

"No girl friends?"

"She would tell you that her life was devoted to her sister."

"Who was the chap who said you can always tell the woman who lives for others by the faces of the others? Whoever he was he knew his onions."

"She lives in a hotel now. The house—you can see it from here —^was put up for sale. Of course, it found a purchaser even at the inflated price Miss Bond put on it. I see it's just been repainted. That's quite new, A month ago it was practically indistinguishable from the landscape and looked very well. Now it has been picked out in that staring buff color it will be a cynosure for all enemy aircraft in the unfortunate event of a third war. But there is a re-forminsf influence at work all over Brakemouth; cinemas are re-opening, all the hotels have been repainted during the past six months. Shortly, no doubt, it will be indistinguishable from Blackpool."

"You tell that to the Blackpuddleians," Crook advised her. "How long's Little Johnny-head-In-Air staying down here?"

"He has not yet confided his plans to us. I feel—assuming we are not merely the victims of coincidence—that Miss Bond is perfectly safe so long as he is on the spot. In both previous cases the tragedy occurred immediately after his return to town."

"We're staying at the same dump," said Crook. "I might be able to find out his plans. You've made up your mind he came down to bump off the last of the three ancients?"

"As I assured him on our journey down, I am a logical person. I look for cause for the effects I see around me."

"Hark to the Civil Service Queen," thought Crook disrespect-Sully. "When the old lady kicks the bucket does little John come into the cash?"

"He is the last remaining relative, but Miss Bond has full control over her fortune. There is nothing, so far as I can see, to prevent her

selling out all her investments and living like a millionaire for the remainder of her life; though, knowing her, I consider that improbable."

"And you think that's enough motive for our little gentleman to risk his neck? Nothing else to go on?"

"The fact that there have been two previous inquests. I hardly think I shall be the only person to think it curious, to say the least …"

Crook interrupted her without ceremony. "Ah, but you're forgetting about British justice. They won't allow that evidence before the court. The judge'U fix it in the minds of the jury by telling 'em to forget anything they may have heard of a suspicious nature. Any clues?"

"Mr. Sherren has not discussed his financial affairs with me. But—there have been a number of anonymous letters, clearly written by someone with an inside knowledge of Miss Bond and her affairs. It is highly suggestive."

"No sense rushin' on the enemy's spear," Crook warned her. "I mean, because a chap writes novels it don't mean he has to write anonymous letters, too. What's the idea, by the way? Cash?"

"That is the extraordinary thing about it. There is no mention of blackmail. I believe the first intent is to terrify Miss Bond, and if that is the case the writer has certainly achieved a measure of success. Her defenses have definitely been undermined."

Crook brooded. "If that chap writes books he must have a brain of sorts. Don't it tell him that if all three of his relations die within a year, all just after he's paid 'em a flyin' visit, somebody might think it a bit of a strain, ^ven for coincidence? Any one else got a motive?"

"I suppose it's possible Clara has a number of enemies; though, as she herself points out, a sense of grievance has to be very strong to go as far as murder. However, if we absolve Mr. Sherren, and I

admit that there is so far no concrete evidence against him, then I stick to my original contention that the main idea of these letters is to give Miss Bond a taste of her own medicine."

"Meanin' she made Isabel Bond's life a misery?"

"Someone fond of Isabel might think so,"

"Who were her special friends?"

"Myself, and Locket, my hostess' ex-housekeeper. And there were others, mostly acquaintances, who may have been incensed by Miss Bond's jealous treatment of her sister."

"Said jealousy bein' due to affection for the sister or the cash that went with her?"

"Shall we say to the power her position gave her? You do appreciate that if her sister married she would be worse off both materially and—can I say morally?"

"I get you," said the obliging Mr. Crook. "You know, there's one thing foxes me. Where do you come in?"

"I have known Miss Bond for a good many years. I was very much attached to her sister. When these letters began to arrive Miss Bond sent for me. I came, not knowing exactly what was happening. She simply wrote: 'I need your assistance as soon as you can come.' That of itself proves to me that she is badly scared."

"If you're on the right track and someone's got murder in mind, that 'ud explain the letters. Lady gets panic-stricken and takes the only sure way out."

"In that case the death must be made to look like suicide."

"It has been done," said Crook.

Miss Pettigrew knitted her angular brows. "There is a flaw there. No one who knew Miss Bond would ever credit her taking her own life. Only the other day she assured me that her principles alone would prevent such a course."

"Ah, but you ain't goin' to be on the jury," Crook assured her earnestly. "They won't know that. Now if I can find out how long our Mr. Sherren's stayin' here, that might give us a time limit."

As it happened, however, for once Mr. Crook's judgment was at fault, for John Sherren's last remaining relative died while he himself was still actually in Brakemouth.

11

THE following afternoon, when Miss Bond came into the hotel after a short brisk walk taken without her faithful companion, Miss Pettigrew, she saw someone bending over the reception desk, apparently trying to persuade the clerk to change his mind about something. For a moment she thought it was her nephew, John, and her heart gave a queer leap; but then she saw that this man was both taller and older than that aspiring novelist. It was simply the similarity of their overcoats that had momentarily deceived her. How different were men and women, she reflected, beginning to cross the hall to the lift. You could tell an individual woman anywhere both by her clothes and by the way she wore them, whereas it was easy to be wrong about a man until he turned and you saw his face. No doubt, she decided, it was proof of that sheeplike quality in men which makes it possible for them to band together in huge industrial organizations, while women remain obstinately individual.

She had almost reached the lift when someone called her name in a pleased, surprised sort of way, and she turned abruptly from sheer astonishment. The men she had known, dead for the most part these many years, and in any event long since dead to her, did not call a lady's name across a hotel lobby. When she saw the identity of the newcomer she wished her first impression had been right and it had been John haggling for a favor. For of all the men on earth this was the one she least wanted to encounter.

But his attitude was the antithesis of hers. He was plainly delighted at their meeting.

"Why, Miss Bond," said he, and out came the welcoming hand she could scarcely refuse to take, "this is a delightful surprise. So this is where you are staying. I saw your house was occupied by new people—

naturally in the circumstances I understand only too well the feelings that prompted you to leave it …"

He had taken her hand and was holding it as affectionately as if they had known one another in the schoolroom. Clara indignantly pulled her fingers free.

"What brings you back to Brakemouth, Mr. Marlowe?" she inquired. "I should have thought you would wish to avoid a place thathas such sad associations for you."

He saw then that it was war to the knife, and that suited him, too. But he was wiser than she, and he knew that the man who keeps his powder dry is liable to win the day.

"Business," he murmured airly. "I'm not here for long. In fact, it looks as though I shall spend the night in the waiting room at the station. I was hoping I might get a room here, but the clerk says they're full up. Unless you'll put in a good word for me …"

He had charm, all right. Even Crook, who was quite unmoved by such a quality in man or woman, would have understood how it was that he'd done as well for himself as he had to date. Even the women he'd betrayed kept a tender spot for him in their hearts: he was the one moment of romance in those gray lives, and to do him justice, he gave them full value for their money during their short time together.

"I am afraid you overestimate my influence," said Miss Bond, her long inflexible upper lip as stiff as even Mr. Kipling could have wished for his best-beloved hero. The clerk, however, made a quick movement.

"Of course, if the gentleman is a friend of yours. Miss Bond, Mr. Hammond might be ready to stretch a point. The difficulty is that the only room we have vacant at the moment is booked for tomorrow night."

"That will suit me excellently," cried Marlowe in buoyant tones. "I have to be in town by then. I'm just here to conduct a matter of business. If you can accommodate me for this one evening I shall be very much obliged."

"No. 18," said the receptionist. "Your luggage, sir?"

"I left it at the station. No sense dragging that all over town. I'll fetch it along now."

He swaggered out, with a final grateful remark to Miss Bond. "This is a great piece of good fortune. Perhaps I shall see you later."

Clara went up to her room, where she remained for a considerable

time. What does he want here? she asked herself. That he had come to this hotel for the express purpose of seeing her, she had no doubt at all. She strove to reassure herself.

"He is a rascal," she told herself fiercely. "I always knew it. I did perfectly right to prevent that fatal marriage. But what insolence to come back here." When she came downstairs she was relieved to see no trace of him. Her respite lasted until six o'clock, when she was sitting alone in the small drawing room. Most of the residents were either in their own rooms, ears glued to private wireless sets, drinking in the general tale of woe that passed as the six o'clock news, or (more wisely) in the bar having a short one. Marlowe came in with easy composure, closed the door and crossed to where she sat

"I'm delighted to find you alone," he said. "I never wrote about poor dear Isabel …"

"We will not speak of my sister, Mr. Marlowe." Her voice was stiff with loathing. "What is it you want with me?"

"If that's the way you want it," murmured he. "It's quite simple. I need money."

"That is hardly a development," snapped the old gorgon.

"I need it very badly. In fact, Mr. Hammond will be out of pocket unless I can engineer a loan before midday tomorrow."

"I assure you, Mr. Marlowe, you are wasting your time so far as I am concerned."

"You are sure you are wise, Miss Bond?"

"If you have nothing else to say to me …"

"Come," he urged her. "Be reasonable. You're quite a person here, I can see that. At your age your position is probably the most important thing in your life. If I were to speak of all I know you might find that position seriously jeopardized."

"If you suppose any one would listen to you …"

"Come, Miss Bond, you cannot have lived such a sheltered existence that you really believe what you say. You know perfectly well that if I give my version of what led up to poor Isabel's death …"

"My sister was accidentally killed by falling from a balcony. The coroner found it was death by misadventure."

"Ah, but it isn't what coroners say that really matters, but what you can persuade people to believe. Suppose it came out that your sister and I

were going to be married, and you intervened to prevent that marriage and that same night she had her fatal fall—

don't you think there'd be a good deal of arithmetic being done all over Brakemouth?"

"No one who knows anything of your record could have anything but approbation for any action of mine that prevented such a step. Why, I have not even any proof that you were free to marry at the time."

"That wasn't the line you took then," Marlowe reminded her. "And what if it came out that when your sister married, your income was halved? Mightn't people begin to think it was cause and effect?"

She began to lose a little ground. "What is this, Mr. Marlowe? Blackmail? Or, rather, I should say, an attempt at blackmail?"

"There's no need to use such terms," he remonstrated. "I simply need a little financial assistance."

"And if I refuse, as I certainly shall?"

"Then I'm afraid it will be very unpleasant for you. You might as well follow Isabel's example and fall off a balcony. You see, your sister had a very confiding nature; she needed sympathy and affection, and if she couldn't get these qualities at home, then she must search farther afield. I was very much in her confidence, so much so that she not only told me a great deal about her early life, she actually committed those facts to paper." He drew a bundle of documents from his breastpocket, "These are only a few of the letters," he said, "but they should be sufficient to convince you that you might be wise to accede to my original request."

"And if I tell you I am not interested in the letters, Mr. Marlowe?"

"I'm afraid I shouldn't believe you. Tell me, Miss Bond, do you ever see the Sunday Record?"

"I believe I have seen it lying about," she acknowledged perfunctorily.

"Next time you see it just take a glance at it. That might help you to change your mind."

"Even the Sunday Record can hardly be so impoverished for scandal that it will pay you for letters from a woman who has been dead nearly twelve months."

"Don't you believe it," said Marlowe cheerfully. "They'd eat 'em. Can't you see the headlines? Echo of Seaside Mystery. Dead Woman's

Letters Reveal Spinster's Secret Life."

"You are very melodramatic," said Miss Bond, scornfully. "Isabel had no secret life."

"No one who reads these letters will believe that. She is very outspoken, and she desperately needed a confidante. She paints a haunting picture of her early days at home, of the lover you would not let her have, the truth about her father and that woman …"

Up came Clara Bond's head with a jerk. "Isabel knew nothing. As to that, I mean …"

"He meant to marry her," said Marlowe in a peculiar tone. He could have sworn the old woman's face turned a shade paler. "You stopped that, too, didn't you?" '

She said in a choked tone: "It was out of the question. It would have been indecent …"

"Anyhow, you stopped it. I fancy Isabel was more in the old gentleman's confidence than you realized. Oh, don't make any mistake about it. There's a big public waiting for a story like this."

Still she rallied. She hadn't fought Bertha Williams and young Thomas and Isabel and Locket all these years without acquiring a stiff line of defense. I've fought before, she reminded herself, I can fight again.

Marlowe, in whom experience had bred a cruel knowledge of the weaknesses of women, was watching her intently. Now he perceived the first crack in her armor of resistance. She might put up a bold front, but she was afraid. This was the moment to push his advantage.

"Don't you think perhaps you would be wiser to live on a rather smaller income and keep the good opinion of your neighbors?" he suggested. "You won't be able to stay in Brakemouth once these letters have appeared. It won't be nice, you know, being pointed at in the street, knowing people are nudging one anotlier when you pass, whispering, 'That's Miss Bond. You know. Her sister had that funny accident.' From there it won't be far from their wondering if perhaps it wasn't an accident after all."

"May I ask what you consider these letters should be worth to me?"

"That's better." He smiled at her. "Now you did me out of a very nice little income about a year ago. Don't you think it would be fair if you made over sufficient capital to bring in approximately

that sum annually? I'm not, you note, asking for any compensation

for the loss of a charming wife."

For a moment even the indomitable old woman was winded.

"Are you out of your mind?" she gasped. "You cannot really suggest that I should sell out half my investments for your benefit?"

"Why not? A lot of men would have asked for more. You've had the double income for nearly a year; then there's the price you got for the house. I suppose legally half that would have come to Isabel if we had been married. No, I can't agree I'm being rapacious. I'm sure you're an enemy of the present Government and approve of private enterprise. I owe it to myself to do the best I can in my own interest. You may not believe it, but I'm nearly sixty-one. Even the Labour Exchange doesn't take any interest in me. It's never been easy for a man of my age to get a job …"

"And then you would hardly know how to settle to work after so many years of living by your wits," she flashed.

"You should be in the racket yourself," he complimented her. "You know all the answers. Well, are you sure you don't think my offer worthy of consideration?"

"Do you imagine a newspaper would give you anything like that sum?" she demanded.

"I dare say not, but to a newspaper it's only a feature. To you it's life itself, isn't it?"

As he spoke, all the charm and kindliness left his face; now he looked wolfish, gaunt, every minute of his age. This was how some of the women he had betrayed had seen him, utterly without pity, without a shred of principle. They, poor fools, could starve, pitch themselves in the Thames, as one had done not so long ago, go out humbly seeking some poorly-paid job to keep body and soul together. This man would be capable of any infamy, of putting a bill of sale on the furniture when he went, so that the last of his dupes hadn't even a bed to sleep on, capable of emptying her box of its last pitiful scraps of finery, robbing her of her rings and modest bracelets while she slept. The metamorphosis was terrifying; it made Clara realize that she was indeed fighting for her life, but she intended to sell it dearly. Everything courageous and ruthless in her rose to meet this disgraceful challenge. Time was now of the essence of the situation. Given time for reflection she would still find some way out of this impasse.

"I shall consult my solicitor," she said. "I believe you can get a long term of imprisonment for demanding money with menaces."

He shook his head. "I call your bluff. By the way, if you could make it convenient to give me a little on account …"

"Not a penny shall you have from me. I've no doubt you wheedled quite a respectable sum out of Isabel, poor deluded creature …"

"If I did, she had full value for the money." He looked at her curiously. "Tell me this. Miss Bond. Have you ever in your life performed a spontaneous, generous action? Did you ever give a man even sixpence because you were sorry for him, and without making inquiries as to whether it was his own fault that he was down and out? Forget your sister for a moment, treat me as a fellow human being who's down on his luck. Lend me a couple of pounds to see me through till mid-day tomorrow."

"Lend you money?" She could scarcely believe this last example of the fellow's insolence. "I would sooner throw it in the sea or give it to the first drunken beggar I met. In a civilized society a ruffian like you would be behind bars. You are a public danger. You're like a leech sucking blood, but unfortunately you cannot be dislodged by a burning cigarette end or a lump of salt. But when the police know of the infamows bargain you have proposed …"

"What was that?" he murmured, but his face had colored deeply and she saw that he was shaken with anger. "Don't forget you have no evidence that I proposed any sort of bargain, and I shall naturally deny it."

"You expect people to believe you? You?"

"Are they more likely to believe a cranky old woman whose god is money? How many years is it since you last looked in a mirror, Miss Bond? You might have a shock if you saw how you appear to other people. No, don't waste any more energy on me. You'll need it all to cope with this situation. Remember, my offer holds until midday tomorrow. After that my terms go up each day. Don't forget to mention that to your solicitor when you consult him."

His arrogance aroused in her every atom of antagonism of which she was capable.

"Take your letters where you please, Mr. Marlowe. I am not interested, and I shall be surprised if any one else is. In any case I

propose to go to the police in the morning, about some anonymous letters I have received recently. You cannot help me there, I suppose, Mr, Marlowe? Ah well, I dare say the police will trace this rascal, and at the same time I will have a word with them about yourself. I fancy they may be very interested to know about your career and your manner of getting a living of recent years. Whatever you do, don't destroy Isabel's letters. I am sure the authorities will be interested in them if no one else is."

He moved toward the door. "Your last word. Miss Bond?"

"It will not be my fault if it is not." Suddenly anger flamed up in her. "I would sooner die than treat with you," she cried.

That anger reassured him. She was frightened, all right.

"Perhaps you will, Clara Bond," he said. "Perhaps you will."

He swung round for a fine dashing exit, but this was spoiled by a quite insignificant plump little man who came hurrying in at that moment, wearing what Marlowe privately considered a rather awful black felt hat and a utility overcoat.

"Sorry, I'm sure," he murmured, but John Sherren belied his appearance by saying: "If there's any hanky-panky I shall remember those words. Aunt Clara, this chap …"

"One of poor Isabel's pick-ups, down on his luck, as msual. We mustn't delay you, Mr. Marlowe. John, remind me that in the morning I have to go to the police about some letters that might interest them."

12

ROGER MARLOWE strode through the hall defiantly humming a contemporary catchy tune.

"You can have her, I don't want her," he sang under his breath. The lift was just going up and he went up in it. He wanted to be alone to think for a minute. He hadn't anticipated that the old woman would be an easy pigeon to pluck, but he hadn't believed she would go to the police until he heard her speak to her nephew, Marlowe might bluff all he pleased, but it certainly wouldn't suit his book to have his record raked up. As for Isabel's letters—they were far more valuable as a weapon to extort cash out of Isabel's sister than as copy for the press. Miss Bond might be a big noise in Brakemouth but in the world at large she was just another of these domineering old ladies who are the pest of hoteliers and shopkeepers. She hadn't really much publicity value, and anyhow it was so long ago. Unless, of course—his eyes brightened—these letters could be linked up with a more recent scandal. If she committed suicide he'd be on toast. All the same, he didn't want to find himself pilloried as the man who drove the old woman to her death. He cursed John Sherren for his untimely entrance.

Like his antagonist, he was accustomed to fighting a lone hand, and he didn't give in easily. He had had his defeats, of course, and as one got older one's attractions faded. Sometimes, catching sight of himself in the morning before he was armed for the day, he would be shocked to see that lined, haggard face, the pouches under the eyes, the tousled gray hair. An hour later, of course, it was dif-‘ ferent. He was quite unrecognizable: a spruce, hearty, pleasantly spoken fellow, looking not much over fifty. Oh, he had a few years left. The old tricks were still good enough, and you couldn't afford to let yourself go. Age was a man's chief enemy. He

thought sometimes, when vitality was at a very low ebb, about fellows who fall in front of trains or out of windows; but he knew he'd never follow their example. He hadn't the nerve. His kind of life bred an insolent defiance. Brakemouth was still full of elderly unaccompanied women, who'd be good for a loan, if nothing else. And there were scores of Brakemouths all around the coast. He got up and stared at himself in the mirror. He looked every hour of his age now. What he wanted was a double Scotch, but in a place like this you'd be expected to pay for your drinks as you had them. He went despairingly through the pockets of his coat, but it was no good. He hadn't change for five shillings in the world. The only thing to do was stroll down and look around as if he were expecting a friend. He could tell the barman he'd wait. Perhaps someone would offer him one, and before it was his turn to pay for a round he could mutter something about the telephone. It was a very old gag but there weren't any better ones.

He began slowly to get ready for the journey downstairs. He'd told Clara Bond he was sixty-one, but actually it was nearer sixty-eight. He was pretty well preserved for his age, he decided. You couldn't always trust these mirrors. Probably by morning Clara Bond would have thought better of going to the police. He looked at Isabel's letters again, hesitating. Safer to destroy them, perhaps. On the odier hand, that nephew of hers might talk her into some sort of offer. He wouldn't hold out, not for long. Perhaps he would have an opportunity to sound him later. Perhaps even the chap was in the bar at this very minute, and if he played his cards well he'd get the double Scotch after all. The very thought made him feel younger. He brushed his suit, rubbed up his shoes, strapped on his wrist the handsome watch diat didn't go but could be counted on to make a good impression, and went jauntily down the stairs.

After Marlowe's departure John remained where he was for about half a minute, staring stupidly at the door. He was distracted by his aunt saying testily: "My dear John, either come in or go out. Also I should like that window closed. I am in imminent danger of pneumonia, and though possibly nothing would please you better than my death, it might not prove quite so profitable as you perhaps hope."

John turned and automatically moved toward the window. When he had shut it the truth of her words sank into his mind. Was it a warning that he wouldn't inherit anyhow? Did she mean to leave everything to that

old witch, Frances Pettigrew?

"Who was that chap?" asked John. "Oh, I know what you said, but—what's his name?"

"I really cannot see that it is of any importance to you, but since you are kind enough to be interested, it is Marlowe."

"Marlowe? Then he … ?"

"Yes?"

"Isn't he the one who was going to marry Aunt Isabel?"

The old woman's voice was bitter as the north wind. "Did she tell you that?"

John let that pass. "Aunt Clara, was he trying to make a touch?"

"Really, John! The vulgarity of your expressions appalls me."

"He said something about Isabel's letters." John's voice was very dogged. "He couldn't have anything on her, surely."

"Certainly not. In any case, I find it difficult to understand how it is possible to have anything, as you so crudely put it, on a dead woman."

"No, of course not, but it might give him power over the dead woman's relatives."

"My dear John, you are allowing your novelist's imagination to run away with you. Mr. Marlowe had hoped to marry your aunt or at all events to appeal to her sympathy to the fullest financial extent, and now that that is no longer possible he has made the mistake of supposing that I am made of the same weak stuff as she was. That is all. The majority of people with regular incomes are pestered from time to time by such men. If you were more successful in your chosen profession you would probably have had experience of them yourself."

John watched her with more perspicacity than she had supposed him to possess. Badly shaken, he decided. So there was something. So what?

"He spoke of an offer being open and letters either written by or once in the possession of Aunt Isabel. And he wants money. Any one can see that. That type lives by its wits. You aren't going to give him anything, are you?"

"If you are afraid that you will be the ultimate sufferer by any such improbable decision on my part …"

"I hadn't thought of that. Hadn't you better tell me … ?"

"When I require your assistance, John, I will ask for it. I must add that I have not hitherto noticed such solicitude on your part for my

welfare."

"You've always been able to look after yourself to date," said John simply. "However, if you won't—it's your funeral, after all."

"A singularly unfortunate expression," gibed Miss Bond. "Ah, here is Frances. Now perhaps we can hope for some sensible conversation."

"I could certainly do with some," agreed Miss Pettigrew briskly. "If the public addiction to films is any indication of the mental stature of the country I am amazed that we are in as good a position as we are… . Ah, Mr. Sherren, still enjoying the fruits of idleness?"

"I had meant to go back tomorrow," said John uneasily.

"Had? So something has happened to make you change your mind?"

"This is all great nonsense," said Miss Bond composedly. "John is making a great flurry because one of poor Isabel's ne'er-do-well

acquaintances has turned up and is proving—obstreperous. What John considers he could do by remaining here I have not yet fathomed."

"I know you think of yourself as invulnerable," said John. "But because Greenglades appears to be a haven of respectability that doesn't mean you're living in a safe world. You're not. It's the jungle, here as elsewhere, and according to the experts, jungle warfare is the most dangerous, the most unpredictable there is."

Miss Pettigrew said in the same brisk voice: "Dear me, I seem to have missed a great deal of excitement while I yawned my head off at that interminable film. Does your nephew imply, Clara, that the author of the anonymous letters has come into the open?"

"I never thought of that," exclaimed John. "But no—he said Isabel's letters."

"So the threats have become concrete? I take it he is asking for money, Clara?"

"When you have seen Mr. Marlowe for yourself, Frances, as you are fairly certain to do since he is unhappily staying in this hotel, you will realize that his main activity is to persuade other people to provide him with a livelihood. However, I propose to lay information with the police in the morning, less on my own account— as John has just observed, I am very well able to look after myself —than on behalf of those other weak-minded women upon whom that type automatically preys."

"And while you are about it you will mention the anonymous letters, won't you, my dear Clara?"

"I doubt whether the police would take those very seriously. However, if it will stop all this argument I shall be delighted to do so. After all, I have been a taxpayer all my life. Who has a greater right than I to demand protection?"

Frances Pettigrew lifted her head to say unexpectedly: "As this i» your nephew's last night at Brakemouth, Clara, for since you intend to approach the police he will not need to change his plans, would it not be a kind gesture to invite him to dine with us? Besides, it may be salutary for this Mr. Marlowe to realize we still have a man in the family."

She was laughing at him and John knew it, but he said at once: "That's very kind. I'd be delighted—that is, if you really mean it. Aunt Clara."

"Since it is obvious that Frances, does, my assent is scarcely required."

John murmured something about washing his hands and returned a few minutes later, minus the hat and coat, and laid himself out to be pleasant. A not-very-well-off bachelor, he had learned young to sing for his supper. Besides, he had his own reasons for wanting to be here tonight.

When he came back he found the two ladies placidly conversing on some quite innocuous topic.

"I hope you don't mind. Aunt Clara," he said. "I've ordered three glasses of sherry. The chap's going to bring them in here."

"Very liverish," said his aunt. "And very extravagant."

"But a delightful treat," supplemented Miss Pettigrew. "And very thoughtful of your nephew."

"In a way it's a celebration, isn't it?" suggested John, with a rather fatuous smile.

"Celebration of what?"

"When shall we three meet again?" said John airily, and Miss Bond wondered whether he'd started on his night's libations in the bar.

"You are being very gallant to two old women," she said severely. But she was thinking hard. She wasn't accustomed to doing anything without some definite end in view. She didn't suppose John was going to try and borrow money from her; if so, he could hardly have prepared the ground worse than by paying half a guinea for three absurdly small glasses of Empire sherry. But equally she was sure it was not affection

behind this move.

The old autocrat would have been horrified to hear that she and the unscrupulous Marlowe had anything in common, but that night at least it was true. Both of them were at heart panic-stricken by the immediate future.

"What's behind this?" thought Miss Bond. "Frances is looking very pleased. Does she know something? Are they in a plot together? Why did she suggest his staying? And he accepted before I had a chance of reinforcing the invitation." She looked covertly from one face to the other, but they told her nothing. "Is Frances really my friend? What does she believe? What does she know? How much did Isabel tell her? She had never said a word. And John. He didn't come down here for no reason at all."

So the thoughts went around and around in her mind like a dormouse on its wheel. I can trust no one, no one, she reminded her self fiercely. I've known that all my life. Keep your own counsel. Don't yield to ordinary human weakness. When knowledge is too much, for you, shut yourself up, don't see a soul. Always be on guard against betrayal, the careless, treacherous word, the sympathetic atmosphere.

The sherry came on a tray and she took a glass suspiciously. Had the waiter turned it in a particular direction so as to ensure her taking a particular glass? But surely the waiter couldn't be in a plot? Still, that had been a queer thing John said about even Greenglades being like a jungle. She tasted the wine cautiously. Not very nice, definitely rather odd, but that might be just the quality of the postwar drink. Before the war, of course, one only drank Spanish sherry. John was tossing his off comfortably enough. On an impulse she lunged forward and filled up his glass from her own.

"A very kind thought," she said breathlessly, "but when one isn't accustomed to drinks, a little is enough."

She waited expectantly. John continued to sip at his glass. Not very good, he was thinking, but you couldn't expect anything better at a place like this. Old women seldom had any palate for drink. Miss Pettigrew had quietly put her glass aside, saying she only drank wine with her meals. She would take it into the dining room with her.

During dinner Miss Bond was unusually gracious. Conversation was general and uninspired. Marlowe didn't appear. Presumably he was out

on the hunt for a fresh prey along the front or at one of the local bars. It was only desperation and the need to nail Mi^ Bond at all costs that had brought him here. And now it looked to him uncommonly probable that he was going to walk into a trap rather than tap oil. It was the usual not very distinguished dinner and afterwards Miss Pettigrew suggested bridge, if John played. John said he did, and they found a fourth in the person of a Major Atkins, a garrulous widower and a habitue of seaside hotels.

In short it was an evening like any other, with nothing on the surface to indicate that it was the last Clara Bond would ever know.

In fact, her mood improved as the evening wore on. She was

playing with her nephew, who showed himself unexpectedly sound as a partner, and Miss Pettigrew and her intolerable partner went down steadily. She played well, too, but Culbertson himself would have found it difficult to win with Major Atkins on the opposite side of the table. He was conversational, confident and rash. All the time he played he talked about the campaigns in which he had taken part, and at the end of each hand he conducted an eager post mortem, pointing out that if his partner had understood his unusual strategy, victory would have been theirs. Miss Pettigrew startled them all a little by observing conversationally, halfway through the evening: "What are your views on murder. Major Atkins? In your experience, is there ever a time when it is justified?"

"Shouldn't like to commit myself," rumbled the Major, "but I've always thought judges should exercise more discretion than they do. There are times when only murder seems to meet the bill."

"How interesting to find we agree on one point," said that human viper, Frances Pettigrew.

She had brought it on herself, of course; the Major was already embarked on the history of an incident that must have been as dull as ditch water twenty years ago. Miss Bond said briskly: "Well played, partner," as John brought off an extremely skilful coup and Miss Pettigrew seized the opportunity to say that bachelors had so many advantages, subtly intimating that when he was in London John spent considerably more time at the card-table than at his desk.

"Did you know Miss Bond's nephew was a writer. Major Atkins?" she added, maliciously.

, "Writing's a woman's job," said Major Atkins. "Chap ought to live

an outdoor life." His glance said he could tell John had never worn a uniform. He picked up the cards and misdealt enthusiastically. But presently even his exuberance was dulled by Miss Bond's complete lack of response. He found himself glancing nervously at the huge masculine watch on his wrist. How long would this old trout expect him to continue losing his pension? He had never played with this trio before and he made an instant resolve never to do it again.

"Lucky in cards, unlucky in love," said he bravely, arranging his hand, which he could see at a glance was an execrable one. He'd

be on the wagon for a fortnight by the time the rubber was over, he shouldn't wonder.

Respite came for him at last at ten o'clock with the arrival of Miss Bond's regular order of tea.

"Won't you have a cup with us. Major Atkins?" said the old lady in a voice that promised, to his ears, arsenic in place of sugar. Hurriedly he pushed back his chair, muttering that he wouldn't get a wink of sleep if he drank tea at this hour.

"Just slip along for a quick one," he said, shooting yet another glance at his watch, and blundering toward the door. "Well, better luck next time, partner."

"One must certainly hope so," agreed the frigid Miss Pettigrew. He went out reflecting that she was exactly like a horse—a trooper's horse, he amended, not an officer's.

"Phew, what an evening! Thank Heaven, that's over," he said.

But it wasn't for the other members of the party, and the next day even he found himself badgered by the police asking a lot of damned silly questions and expecting him to give verbatim reports of anything his three companions had said. As if a man of action could be expected to listen seriously to two old women and a chap who wrote novels.

13

JOHN, on the other hand, greeted the advent of tea with a spinsterish delight. His excellent Mrs. Pringle, he said, always brought him a pot of tea last thing. Indeed, his acceptance of the offer would have done credit to a Victorian curate. He became quite playful about his landlady, describing her as a good soul come down in the world through marriage and kindred misfortunes.

Miss Bond, who had already recovered from her brief amiability, said he must miss these attentions at the inn where he was putting up. John startled them both by saying that though he didn't imagine he and the Major would have much in common, he did emphatically agree with his view that there were occasions when murder was the only way out.

"What occasions?" asked Miss Bond.

John became a little flustered. "Where the death of the victim is of general benefit to the community," he suggested.

"And you are to be the sole judge of that knotty point, my dear John?"

John, thus goaded, turned to Miss Pettigrew. "The first time I saw you," he said, "you were explaining to the assistant at Garrods that there were occasions on which you would consider yourself a benefactor—benefactress—if you committed a murder."

"Indeed!" said Miss Pettigrew. "I have seen no reason to alter my opinion."

Miss Bond was pouring out the tea; she looked with real regret at the empty cup. She knew that she would be charged for four teas, and it went to her frugal heart to think that one would be wasted. Then happened one of those things you can't account for but that change the whole shape of a pattern. The door opened softly and Roger Marlowe came in.

There were very few people in the small drawing room. A certain Commander Potter and his wife had come in after a brisk turn on the front and sunk themselves into a couple of chairs a little distance from the bridge players. There was a rousing play on the wireless this evening and practically all the residents, equipped with their knitting, were ensconced, some with hands cupped round their ears, in the big drawing room, shuddering delightfully as scream after scream of maniacal laughter rang out over the ether.

Marlowe came quite close by the bridge table, bowed slightly to Miss Bond, and said he had been told there was a Bradshaw in the adjacent bookshelf. He had to make sure about his train the next day. Miss Bond did an astonishing thing.

"Won't you join us for a cup of tea, Mr. Marlowe?" she said, cordially. "Meet my nephew. Did you know I had a nephew, a very advanced novelist, far too advanced for an old woman like me to know what he's talking about? Oh—but I forgot—1 don't think you've met my friend. Miss Pettigrew. She was dear Isabel's main confidante. I expect Isabel often mentioned her."

Her bold action took the wind out of everyone's sails. Even Marlowe seemed momentarily taken aback. What's she up to now? he tliought. He didn't for an instant believe it was anything but a trick to get the letters away from him somehow without paying for them, but he'd left them locked in his room, where they should be safe enough. And since he was accustomed to take whatever offered, even a cup of tea, he said in the voice of the experienced lady-killer: "That's uncommonly kind of you, Miss Bond. I won't say no." He moved over into the Major's vacant seat. "Good luck, I hope," he continued, genially.

"Speaking for myself," said Miss Pettigrew, "I played with Major Atkins. He had some most interesting stories to tell us of his hairbreadth experiences abroad, but I wonder if he has ever been nearer death than he was tonight when he trumped my last trick."

"I always say you need to be lucky or exceptionally brainy to win at cards," Marlowe went on, taking the cup Miss Bond offered him, and handing it on to Miss Pettigrew as if he were giving her a bouquet. "A poor man like myself …"

"Surely you gamble, Mr. Marlowe?" suggested Miss Bond. "You have the air of a most reckless player."

"Perhaps," murmured Miss Pettigrew, "Mr. Marlowe prefers to bet on certainties." (Oh, the snakes' cage would have been green with jealousy to hear the old women baiting their unfortunate male companions.) "So much safer."

Marlowe sent her the sort of glance to which she must have long since become accustomed; at all events it didn't produce the smallest crack in her composure. John provided a distraction by saying as he took his cup: "No sugar? And yet one understands the warehouses are bursting with it. All being kept for the General Election, I suppose." He exchanged a man-of-the-world glance with Marlowe. "They're very niggardly at the Railway Hotel, too. Now, Mrs. Pringle always contrives to give me sugar with my tea and coffee."

"Perhaps it would be better for you if she didn't," said Miss Bond. "Short men shouldn't be fat. It doesn't suit them."

John pretended not to have heard. "Fortunately I have some saccharine," he said.

"There is no need to be so aggressive about it," snapped Miss

Bond. "We are all provided, except Frances, who never takes sugar or milk in her tea. Mr. Marlowe, I am sure you like yours sweet."

"I have a weakness," he confessed. "But look here, I don't want to rob you." Just as though he hadn't made a life-work of robbing women and of far more valuable things than saccharine, too.

"I am amply supplied," said Miss Bond, rummaging in her huge black velvet hold-all. And what didn't it hold? John reflected. Everything but the kitchen stove. It was a joke among the chambermaids that if she could have managed it she'd have taken up the carpet every time she left her room.

Marlowe smiled. I thought she'd come round, he told himself. If I play my cards well, I ought to be settled for life. It seemed to him, sensitive, as experience had made him to atmosphere, that he wasn't the only person present on hot bricks tonight. The novelist chap was looking jumpy, too. As for Miss Pettigrew, he wouldn't have trusted her any further than he'd have trusted a cobra. Why, for all he knew, the stuff the old witch was putting into his tea was arsenic, not saccharine.

There was a slight commotion going on at the table. John, foiled of his good intentions where Marlowe was concerned, had found his bottle of saccharine and was heartily shaking some of the contents into his

aunt's cup of tea. When Miss Bond noticed this she was seriously annoyed.

"My dear John, there is no need to be so officious," she snapped. "The management provides sugar—naturally—for the residents." Out of the great black bag she brought a little blue tin with pictures of lumps of sugar painted on it. This opened revealed about a dozen lumps. It went through John's mind that a really hospitable hostess would have handed the sugar around in the first place. Nobody could like saccharine; personally he detested it, declaring it didn't by any means take the place of sugar.

Miss Pettigrew seemed to agree with him. "Dear me!" she said, leaning forward. "You remind me of the squirrel—or is it the ant? — storing its nuts for the winter."

"I am sorry for the children under your care if you taught them that ants eat nuts," was Miss Bond's acid retort. "I believe, Frances, you do not take sugar in your tea."

"Unfortunately not," agreed Miss Pettigrew. She glared at John, who had courageously put out his hand and taken a piece of sugar out of the box. If he had bitten her on the nose his aunt could hardly have been more startled.

Mr. Marlowe in the meantime was making himself charming to Miss Pettigrew.

"Acidity?" he was whispering in his most coaxing tone. "I wonder if you would allow me to recommend an infallible remedy."

"Thank you," said the ex-governess. "There is only one and I know it."

"You mean?"

"Six feet of earth and the conquering worm."

Even Mr. Marlowe's affability was dashed by that. He looked around to see if he had missed his chance of getting a lump of sugar and found that he had. Miss Pettigrew, however, had taken one, saying composedly: "I will keep this for my coffee tomorrow. The hotel is very good to residents, as Miss Bond perpetually assures me, but it is a little less generous to casual visitors like myself."

"You must not let me detain you in Brakemouth an instant longer than is quite convenient," suggested Miss Bond.

John, as if to defend his temerity in helping himself to sugar, was

now stirring it violently into his tea, with the result that he lost control of the teaspoon and a few splashes of the dark liquid fell on his aunt's gown. Instantly she began to upbraid him.

"Really, John, anyone could tell you were a bachelor. A wife might have civilized you. What else can you expect when you stir your tea in that plebeian fashion …" Her tone implied that though he might play cards with gentlewomen he drank his tea with landladies, which was, in fact, about the size of it.

"There is no harm done, Clara," said Miss Pettigrew in exasperating tones. John supposed she was still smarting from her bridge losses.

"My dear Frances, you may be in a position to ruin your clothes without a second thought, but I, who do not buy coupons on the black market and have no money to throw away on new dresses, have to be more careful."

She asked Marlowe to ring the bell, and when the waitress came, sharply demanded warm water and a cloth—a clean cloth, she amplified. The girl looked sulky and Clara Bond raised her voice.

Commander Potter, who happened to catch her eye, looked away hurriedly. He liked to boast that he had been impervious under shot and shell, but Clara Bond could cow him with a glance. John, very red in the face, began to apologize, but was quelled by Miss Pettigrew, who said: Nonsense, the sort of accident that might happen to anyone. The only member of the quartet who seemed perfectly at ease was Roger Marlowe. He took the cloth from the waitress and began to dab at the damaged dress, but Miss Bond took it out of his hands and made a thorough job of it herself.

"The tea will be quite cold," said Miss Pettigrew in a resigned voice, lifting her cup half-heartedly to her lips, but Miss Bond, terrified that she might be expected to order another brew, said: "Nonsense. Let me taste it."

Marlowe handed it to her in a very gallant fashion and then tasted his own. It was like treacle, but he said at once: "Just what the doctor ordered. It's only the ladies who like their tea red-hot."

Miss Bond completed John's discomfiture by saying that if he insisted on giving her saccharine he might at least make a proper job of it, and took another lump of sugar.

"You must like your tea like syrup," said Miss Pettigrew, but Miss

Bond said that at her time of life she was entitled to a little luxury.

"Are you staying here long, Mr. Marlowe?" Miss Pettigrew continued.

"Only until tomorrow, I fear. Then I must return to town on business."

"Perhaps you'll be going up by the same train as my nephew. He also has to return tomorrow."

"I go by a very early train," put in John, hastily.

"Have you your family in London, Mr. Marlowe?" asked Miss Pettigrew.

He dropped his absurdly long lashes. "Unhappily I am a widower. I had hoped at one time—I don't think you know I was a great friend of Isabel's. I was terribly shocked to hear of her death."

"Isabel was a very sympathetic character. I am sure you realized that."

"Exactly. We had a great deal in common."

"But not so much," reflected John vulgarly, "as you'd have liked."

"I don't seem to remember her mentioning you in her letters," continued Miss Pettigrew.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Marlowe in gentler tones, "experience had made her wise." '

"Nothing," contradicted Miss Bond crisply, "could have done that."

Even Miss Pettigrew, even Marlowe, were momentarily put out of countenance, and before John could pour his well-meaning oil on the waters, Commander Potter got to his feet, saying heartily: "All aboard the lugger for the last trip tonight. It's almost ten-thirty when these land-lubbers go off duty."

By this he meant that after half-past ten the porter. Hart, retired to his own quarters, and anybody who wanted to go up after that had to manipulate the old-fashioned elevator for himself. Martinets like Commander Potter, however, couldn't see why the porter shouldn't do the job for which he was engaged, and he always beetled off as the hands of the clock drew towards 10.30. Tonight, as soon as he had spoken. Miss Pettigrew, finding some reason for his existence for once, rose smartly to her feet.

"Unless you wish to bring yourself up, Clara," she said ominously, but Miss Bond brushed aside her suggestion with an impatient wave of

the hand.

"My nephew will bring me up when I am ready," she said. "Or possibly Mr. Marlowe …"

But Marlowe had no desire to find himself alone with her at this juncture, so he echoed old Mrs. Potter's inane remark about it being time for Bedfordshire, and went forward to open the door for the ladies with what the acid Miss Pettigrew thought a quite ridiculous amount of bowing and scraping.

"Are you sure Mr. Sherren understands the working of the elevator?" asked Frances dourly.

"If not, he can presumably learn."

Mrs. Potter teetered out, saying something about "We oldsters not being as young as we were," and Miss Bond scarcely waited for the door to close before she remarked: "Nevertheless, some of us still retain possession of our senses."

Then the door really did close, leaving John feeling like a very unprotected rabbit in the presence of a completely unscrupulous boa-constrictor. But he hoped no one guessed this. He reminded himself this was the last time, the last time, the last time …

14

HE MUST have started saying the words aloud for he became aware of his aunt looking at him in a most peculiar manner.

"Really, John," she said, "you are exhibiting the worst traits of the elderly maiden gentleman."

"I don't agree in the least," said John. "Writers are perpetually involved in conversations which I have no doubt sound quite meaningless —to any one who happens to overhear them." He thought he had dealt with that with admirable firmness. "What was it you wished to say to me. Aunt Clara?"

"Nothing in particular," retorted his spirited companion, "but I don't choose to have Frances Pettigrew giving me orders when she's my guest. However, since you yourself have raised the point, and since this may be my last opportunity of giving you advice— no, John, do not contradict me, if you please. At my age one must be prepared for emergencies, and if you weren't thinking of that, why were you mouthing that phrase —'The last time, the last time' —so feverishly a moment ago? Since, as I say, this may be my last opportunity, I propose to say a few plain words. After your mother died and your father so foolishly threw himself into the jaws of the heathen, I did my best to bring you up as I would a son of my own. As you know, I consider life is intended for some particular purpose, and even you can hardly suggest you have fulfilled such a purpose by writing a handful of novels that, if we are to be candid, can have made no difference to humanity in the mass, and little, I fear, to your own finances. You are still no more than middle-aged. In these days forty is regarded almost as a young man. It is not too late to make something of your life. I don't, of course, suggest you should enlist for the mines or anything drastic like that. You would naturally be more of a liability than

an asset, but there must be some useful service you could render to the community. It is not enough to claim that you live within your income unless-you do something to merit that income."

John by this time was white with passion: he would have been delighted to see his aunt drop dead on the carpet before him.

"I don't think material success is the only or even the best criterion for judging the permanent value of a man's work," he compelled himself to stammer. "The novelist is said to be the best historian of his time and though I admit I am not widely recognized at present, future generations …"

But he got no further. "My dear John, if your books are not in print, how can you hope they will influence future generations? Now, what qualifications have you? You received an excellent education, you held some sort of position during the war …"

"I don't really know why you suddenly take this interest in me. Aunt Clara, but in these days, when nearly every one wants to be in some other country or doing some other job, I should have thought you'd agree that when you find a man who is perfectly happy the way he is …"

He was getting so much involved he was almost obliged when she interrupted him.

"A man's aim must exceed his grasp."

"Mine does," he said simply. "All the same. Aunt Clara, I'm happy to say there are a few people who differ in their estimation of my work, and in any case," he wound up on a burst of overwhelming honesty, "I like doing it, even if it's never likely to make my fortune."

For some reason this so much enraged the old woman that she said abruptly: "I am exceedingly tired. I cannot continue this pointless conversation. I understand that any one foolish enough to play cards with Major Atkins experiences this utter exhaustion almost immediately afterwards. It is different, of course, for Frances. She is made of whalebone."

John, relieved that the conversation had come to an end and only sorry that Hart wouldn't be there to take up the elevator, collected the old lady's impedimenta, her knitting-bag and library book, and opened the door, conscious that he didn't do it with half the éclat of that arch-poseur. Roger Marlowe. Miss Bond put her huge haughty nose in the air and said, "I trust you understand these elevators, John," and he replied, "I doubt it,

but I dare say there will be instructions …"

"I will give you instructions," said Miss Bond.

The hall into which they emerged was quite empty; only John's coat hung forlornly like a forgotten corpse on the wall. That, at least, was how John saw it, remembering the famous Father Brown story whose title momentarily escaped him. Miss Bond, looking neither right nor left, made a bee-line for the elevator. The clock over the deserted desk stood a few minutes to eleven.

"Open the gate," said Miss Bond. "John, where are you? Why are you loitering there?"

"There seems to be a letter for you on the table," murmured John.

"What's that?" The old voice sharpened. "The post came in a long time ago."

"I don't think it came by post."

She marched forward and snatched it out of his hand.

"Another of these scurrilous communications," she said with an assumption of carelessness that didn't in the least deceive that student of human nature, John Sherren. "Since I propose to go to the police tomorrow I may as well show them this, too." She opened her vast bag and thrust it in. Just as she was closing it she exclaimed: "My gold pencil is missing. I had it this evening adding up the score. Do you suppose that creature … ?"

"I shouldn't think so," said John, but his voice lacked conviction. He wouldn't be the least surprised to know that the pencil lay at this moment in Marlowe's pocket. "You must have dropped it when you got up. The servants will find it in the morning."

"My father always taught me it was wrong to put temptation in their way. It is not asking a great deal of you, John …"

John made his way back to the drawing room, crawling about on all fours looking under chairs and rugs like a plump little bear. Eventually he found the pencil tucked away under a cushion, together with a long gray hairpin and somebody's bill for haberdashery.

"What a long time you've been," said his aunt, who was standing where he had left her. "I'm an old woman to wait about in this draught, and it may be very unpleasant for you if I catch pneumonia and die and it comes out that you deliberately kept me hanging about with that end in view."

"She's as dotty as poor Aunt Isabel," reflected John, following her into the elevator and shutting the gate. "Quite as dotty and much less pleasant." He glanced surreptitiously at the watch on his wrist. Eleven-three. In twelve hours he'd be back in London at his desk, back amid sympathetic surroundings where he was John Sherren, a man who not only wrote books but got them printed, whose landlady was clever about sugar and managed to get him real China tea and lemons, and washed all his shirts and socks herself.

Miss Pettigrew, waiting stiffly in her room, thought she would never hear die elevator creak to the second floor. What on earth was Clara saying to her nephew? Like all people who don't trust their neighbors. Miss Pettigrew thought it quite probable the conversation was about herself and took on a most uncomplimentary complexion. At last she heard the sound of footsteps coming along the corridor and then the sound of a door closing. She waited for the familiar sound of the elevator door clashing, but instead there came a rap on her door and when she opened it there was John himself, looking, she thought, a bit wild and frayed, not at all the successful novelist of fiction. He even looked a little alarmed, but then the sight of her masterful self, clad in a masculine Jaeger dressing-gown with a plaid lining and a gentlemanly brown cord, might have staggered even the experienced Mr. Marlowe.

"Oh, Miss Pettigrew," he began nervously, "my aunt sent me to say she is very tired and she is going straight to bed. She looks forward to seeing you in the morning."

"Did she say that?" inquired Miss Pettigrew dryly.

John, remembering his aunt's final, "I really think it is time Miss Pettigrew returned to her other friends. She means well no doubt, but she has been a governess for so long she forgets the world is not entirely composed of mentally deficient children," hesitated. Miss Pettigrew smiled appreciatively.

"Of course it has been a most exciting evening. We don't generally get so many London visitors at one time, and both in their own way so distinguished." Vipers weren't in it, thought John desperately.

"As a matter of fact," he broke out, "she'd be furious if she knew I was saying this to you, but I'm troubled about her. I am her sole surviving relative and I do have a sense of responsibility, as any man in my position must. I wonder if I may ask you a favor."

"What is that?" She had personality, all right, he thought. He'd made no mistake that first afternoon at Garrods. His mind went to the book he had just begun, the book revolving around her, though of course it wasn't her really, but his conception of a woman who resembled her in appearance. He hadn't done his subject justice. When he got back to town tomorrow he'd start it again.

"Am I such an ogress, Mr. Sherren, or have you forgotten what it was you were going to ask me?" Miss Pettigrew put an end to his mooning.

"It's about Aunt Clara," he said rapidly. "She strikes me as definitely deteriorating—in health, I mean. She's as sharp-witted as ever, but she does seem to me—feeble is perhaps the word. At her age it's not so surprising, and of course these anonymous letters arc clearly preying on her mind. And then that fellow Marlowe?"

"Are you linking him up with the letters?"

"I hadn't thought of that," said John slowly, "but I suppose it's possible. In fact, that might explain …"

"Explain what?"

"There was another of them tonight. Did you know?"

"How should I? Miss Bond didn't speak of it."

"It was on the table in the hall. I found it there on our way to the elevator."

Up came Miss Pettigrew's nose, like a questing hound. "Mr. Sherren, that letter was not there when I came upstairs."

"You mean, you didn't notice it," prompted John, unwisely.

"I mean, Mr. Sherren, precisely what I say. It was not there. Even if I had overlooked it, it is morally impossible that Commander Potter should have done so. That man could not pass a letter without picking it up, examining the handwriting, the postmark, the superscription and even acting as amateur postman if that were possible. If that letter had been on the table at half-past ten tonight the Commander would have held up the elevator for the pleasure of bringing the letter into the small drawing room and delivering it in person."

"In that case," he said shortly, "we can assume it was not there when you and the Potters went past. Was Marlowe with you?"

"He stopped to get his coat and followed us into the elevator."

"Stopped, eh?"

"For a moment, yes. Hart held up the elevator for him."

"His coat was hanging on the wall near mine," said John, slowly. "To fetch it he would pass by the table where the letter was found."

"The same idea," said Miss Pettigrew dryly, "had occurred to me. Did you see the contents of this letter?"

"Aunt Clara hadn't opened it when I left her. She said she pro^ posed to take it to the police in the morning."

"I think that improbable," said Miss Pettigrew, grimly.

"I had doubts myself," acknowledged John. "That's another reason why I wanted to ask if you would be kind enough to keep in touch with me if you see any change in her. This is my address …" He offered her a very correct visiting card. It was typical of him that even in 1949 he had beautifully engraved cards.

"You see," he amplified, "this enemy of my aunt's is someone close at hand, possibly even someone we haven't so far suspected. I admit it looks a little suspicious that Marlowe should have passed through the hall immediately before the letter was discovered, but we should have to prove that he has been in Brakemouth on various occasions during the past few months—unless, of course, he has a partner." His eyes brightened speculatively.

"Very ingenious," approved Miss Pettigrew. "It is not difficult to guess the identity of the partner you have in mind. Well, Mr. Sherren, I promise you I will let you know how things progress, and I must say I admire your conscientious attitude. It's not every man who would take so much trouble for an old woman who treats him with scant respect."

But John didn't intend to be drawn. He said gracefully that when people got older their outlooks were sometimes a little distorted and went ofiE.

The stage was now all set for the fall of the curtain.

The hotel was very silent and almost entirely dark. In the corridors the merest gleam of light burned, for Hammond was an ardent disciple of Mr. Gaitskill, -who didn't believe in wasting electricity, and of Sir Stafford Cripps, who didn't believe in wasting

money. Nearly all the residents were asleep; only behind three doors (apart from Hammond who, in his own quarters, was still wrestling with the various problems that beset a man in his position) did the light still burn, the rooms allotted to Miss Bond, Miss Pettigrew and Mr. Marlowe.

Marlowe was remembering the old woman's threat to go to the police the next day. In spite of his bluff, it might prove disastrous for Roger Marlowe if she did.

"But you won't," he decided, and once again his face wore the wolfish look that had transformed it a few hours before. "No, my lady," he apostrophized her, "you may think a lot of yourself, but that's one thing you'll never do."

Miss Pettigrew fastened steel curlers into her Spartan hair-do and thought about her conversation with John Sherren. She looked at the card he had left her. What did he expect was going to happen to the old lady that he was so insistent on being kept informed?

"Well," she said in her deep, incisive voice, putting up her hand to the electric-light switch, "time will show."

She took off her dressing-gown and got into bed, an uncompromising figure in a nainsook nightdress, her hair bristling like the head of a Medusa.

In her room Miss Bond sat on the side of her bed, reading the last of the anonymous letters. The writer had thought better of his recent threat —"This is the last you will receive"—or perhaps he had thought they weren't moving fast enough.

This final message was in rhyme.

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages,
Thou thy worldly task has done …

The paper dropped from her shaking hand on to the eiderdown. She was so tired. Yet there was danger in yielding to this sense of overwhelming exhaustion. Someone wanted her to go to sleep. Why? Because when you're asleep you're helpless. Rising stiffly, she tottered over to the door and turned the key. Back on the bed she picked up the paper again. There was another line—something about wages. Wages of sin is death. Death. She began to shiver. Goose walking over my grave. Death. She'd seen them all go before her. Her father—Isabel—all her contemporaries except

Frances—and Locket, of course. Frances—was she a friend or an enemy? Fear no more—who wrote that? Frances would know. Frances

knew everything. Or—she caught herself up sharply— nearly everything. No one knows everything. It wouldn't be safe. Except God, of course, and if He didn't interfere to prevent two world wars you can't expect Him to take much interest in poor, tired Clara Bond. Still, even if God didn't, someone did. These letters didn't write themselves. And they were dangerous. Any day now she might find it was her turn to join those others. A knock at the door and when you opened it there'd be death on the other side. Clara Bond, thou fool, this night is thy soul required of thee.

In sudden nervous rage she seized the slip of paper, tore and clawed it to shreds, flung the tortured remnants out of die window. Then, exhausted, she sank back.

The envelope slipped to the floor, where the police found it the next day.

"Tomorrow," said Miss Bond in the unnaturally clear voice of someone just about to 'go off,' "tomorrow I have something very important to do. I mustn't forget. Tomorrow may prove the most important day of my life."

The room seemed very dark in spite of the light that was still burning. Her throat seemed very dry. She took up the glass of water John had poured out for her just before he left the room and began to drink. Lovely and cool, she thought, lovely—and—cool. Lovely … She only just put the glass down in time. Now she lay back on the bed fully dressed, a shriveled, helpless old woman, who didn't know how she was going to cope any more. All the years of battle beat up in her mind, harder battles than any one could guess; all her enemies, that widow, Thomas, the nurse, Marlowe, the writer of these letters. They seemed to be converging on her, a ruthless shadowy army.

"Frances!" she exclaimed sharply. "Frances, where are you?"

But no one came, and though she wanted to get up she couldn't move any more. She thought sleepily that if the door was locked no one could get in, knew a moment of terror at the thought that perhaps someone had been in the room all the time, tried to cry out, but her throat was too dry, tried to find the glass of water, but someone must have taken it away. The light was going out, too, going out in the room and going out in her mind.

And quite soon the last glimmer faded and she went down into the final darkness of all.

When he left Greenglades John did not immediately return to the Railway Hotel. His brain was humming with impressions, with suspicions, with speculations on the future. It was a good thing he had remembered to give Miss Pettigrew his card. The old girl (by which he meant his Aunt Clara) certainly looked very dickey. If she died—when she died—Heaven to feel safe at last, go to a decent tailor instead of explaining that these ready-made suits are a godsend to the artist who hasn't time to hang about in fitting-rooms. A service flat, a decent bottle of wine, the knowledge that you could ask another chap out without wondering what it would cost you. He saw himself casually hailing taxis, joining a good club. After all, no one would be surprised if she popped off any time. It couldn't make much difference—except, of course, to a man like himself. He began to review this matter of the letters. They were a signpost all right—pointing to what? Say she died tonight, what would people suspect? Foul play? But there had to be a motive there. Surely an astute murderer, he reflected, would time his murder when there was no obvious motive. It rang in his head, shaping his reflections—no obvious motive.

It was approaching midnight when he returned. The Railway Hotel didn't pack up as early as Greenglades, and Crook was still sitting in the lobby.

"Nice night," he offered as John came in.

"Yes. I've just been for a prowl along the front. Had a rather exhausting evening—my aunt and her old friend. Miss Pettigrew."

"How was Miss Pettigrew?"

John looked startled. "I wasn't aware you knew her."

"Great buddies," said Crook, tranquilly. "Asks my advice."

"Does she take it?"

"Ever know a woman not take something she could get for nothing?"

John brooded a moment. Then, "I'm worried about my aunt," he announced. No harm saying it to as many people as possible. "Looks to me as though she was breaking up."

"It's a way they have in your family, ain't it?" Crook agreed.

"Of course she's no chicken," flared John, on the defensive at once.

"And she may as well go while she's still compos mentis." Crook could play this hand with any one.

"She can't get much pleasure out of her life," John argued, but

Crook, who also appeared argumentative, said, “You’d be surprised.”

John decided to change the subject. “I’m going back to town first thing in the morning,” he observed. “Got to get to work on this new book of mine.”

“Birth of a masterpiece,” beamed Crook. “Ought to have Cecil B. de Mille around.”

John gave it up. He didn’t stand an earthly chance with Crook. He said as he had to be up early he’d go to bed now, and departed forthwith.

15

THE chambermaid who waited on Floor Two, on which both Miss Bond and Miss Pettigrew were accommodated, was, in Mr. Hammond's old-fashioned diction, not up to snuff. By which he meant that she wasn't one of the elderly respectable women he liked best to employ but a smart modern young creature called Marlene, with platinum blond hair on her shoulders and painted fingernails. Her education, never of a very high standard, had been completed by twice-weekly visits to the cinema, and she made it clear that Greenglades was simply a stop-gap employment for her until she could find some way of evading the Control of Engagements Order. She hadn't, she said frankly, much use for what was virtually an old-age pensioners' establishment. True, these pensioners lived on what their relations had left them instead of being dependent on the Government, but that didn't make them particularly generous about tips, and they expected a great deal more service for much smaller rewards than an ambitious girl could pick up at Warrens or the Metropole.

"Nothing ever happens at Greenglades," she confided to one of her numerous male escorts. "If the Day of Judgment was to sound overnight and they were all to drop dead in their tracks, you wouldn't notice much difference except that they wouldn't be able to yap so much."

On the morning after Miss Bond's bridge party, however, sometliing did happen. When she took the old lady's early tea along to her room, she found the door locked. Miss Bond belonged to a generation that invariably locks its doors in hotels, and as invariably unlocks them before the arrival of morning tea. Today, however, there was no open door and no response to the girl's repeated rapping.

"Putting on her tovipee and fitting in her teeth, I dare say," thought the irreverent Marlene, leaning against the door and balancing the tray

precariously on one knee while she rattled the knob. But when even that effort met with no response a pleasurable sense of calamity began to invade her. Setting the tray down on a small table in the passage, she marched along to Miss Pettigrew's room. The chambermaid's abrupt announcement that, "Something's happened to Miss Bond. Her door's locked and there's no answer," provoked no gesture of dismay or astonishment.

"No doubt she is in the bathroom," said Miss Pettigrew coolly. (All the bedroom doors locked automatically on the outside when the occupants left their rooms.)

"Well, she isn't. That bathroom door's open. I noticed as I went by."

"Then she is sleeping late." "She's sleeping like the dead, if she is."

"Dear me, Marlene. What a very melodramatic mind you have. Have you brought my tea?"

Marlene immediately looked sulky. "It's outside. What'll I do about Miss Bond's?"

"She will do doubt ring when she is ready. In the meantime you might take her tea to someone else."

Miss Pettigrew reached out and began to envelope herself in the Jaeger dressing-gown that had originally belonged to her father and that she had inherited thirty years ago.

"When I have had my tea I will go along to Miss Bond's room

myself. It is improbable that she has met with an accident, but her nephew did mention to me last night that she was not quite herself. I knew it was unwise to allow him to bring her up in the elevator, with a heart like hers."

She had taken her tray from Marlene's hand, poured out the tea, and now began to drink it.

"Go back and knock once more," she said. Marlene felt a shade of hope. The old geezer was looking a bit gray about the gills. Perhaps something had happened. Not that an old girl like that dying of a weak heart was much fun. If she'd been found at the bottom of the elevator shaft it would have been a different matter—you could have speculated which of the others, all of whom, Marlene was convinced, hated her like poison, had pushed her there. She went back and banged so loudly on the old lady's door that another door, a little farther down, flew open, and Miss Gadshill, in a pink-flannel dressing-gown, a pink shingle-cap, pink

rabbit slippers and flourishing a pink plastic sponge bag, flew out.

"What is happening?" she exclaimed, her poorly-fitting teeth chattering on their own account like an echo. "From the noise you are making one would think it was murder."

"P'raps it is," said Marlene, in tones of deep relish.

Miss Gadshill looked instantly delighted. "Miss Bond? Dear me, Marlene, you shouldn't say such things. Can you not waken her?"

"Don't seem like it."

"But surely," Miss Gadshill stooped her angular form to peer under her neighbor's door, "her light is on."

"So what?" asked Marlene, pretending she had noticed it all along. "P'raps she's had a stroke. Anyway I've made enough noise to wake the dead."

But that, it transpired, was precisely what she could not do.

After some time, when still their knocks and calls aroused no response, Miss Pettigrew announced her intention of sending for Mr. Hammond.

Mr. Hammond was very reluctant to use the master key and only Miss Pettigrew's expressed conviction that something was wrong overruled his objections. There was a further delay when it was discovered that the key was on the inside of the door.

"In the pictures," breathed the ecstatic Marlene, her mind filled

with visions of the odious Miss Bond stabbed, strangled or hanging from a hook behind the door, "they sort of wiggle it out with a bit of wire."

Hart, the porter, showed unexpected skill in dealing with this contingency, and eventually the key was heard to tinkle to the floor. Mr. Hammond inserted the master key and Miss Pettigrew marched into the room.

There could be no doubt that Clara Bond was quite dead and had been for several hours. A far less experienced hand than Miss Pettigrew could have told you that. She must have been overcome quite suddenly after she reached her room, for she had not begun to undress. She had fallen sideways on the bed, the big black reticule slipping from her limp hand.

Mr. Hammond looked as disturbed as hotel managers always do ^vhen an unexpected death takes place on the premises, but Miss

Pettigrew proceeded to reassure him.

"Her nephew, who dined here last night, came to my room before leaving the hotel, to tell me he was anxious about her," she told him. "He left his London address with me in case of emergencies."

"Did you notice anything out of the way last night. Miss Pettigrew?"

"I cannot truly say I did. But I think she had something on her mind. Since her sister's death last year she has not been quite herself, and of course she was not a young woman."

"Was she under a doctor?" continued Mr. Hammond, using the extraordinary colloquialism that all his countrymen understood at once. He devoutly hoped so. An inquest was always a bad advertisement for a hotel.

"I don't know that she had seen him at all recently, but she used to employ Dr. Munster. It was he who warned her about her heart. It was defective, you know. She invariably said she believed nothing a doctor told her, but I noticed she was careful about stairs and hurrying."

"Munster? We'd better get him to come in, though I'm afraid there's nothing to be done."

Miss Pettigrew appreciated perfectly that the manager was far more concerned for the effect of this death on his hotel than on the dead woman's account. It seemed to her a wholly reasonable attitude. You couldn't expect any one to be particularly sorry that

Miss Bond was no more; she had never tried to win love, and she hadn't succeeded without trying.

"If you will telephone to Dr. Munster," she continued, "I will try and get in touch with her nephew. He told me he was returning to London today but he will hardly have started yet."

But when she was put through to the Railway Hotel she was informed that John had already left. Arthur Crook was her informant. "Went on the 8.55," he said.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Miss Pettigrew. "How time does run on. Ah, well, he will have to return immediately."

"Must be getting used to that," said Crook in heartless tones. "The usual?"

"Miss Bond was found dead on her bed this morning."

"On, not in?"

"That is what I said."

"Knife in her throat?" gloated Crook.

"It appears to be a heart attack. She collapsed before she could begin to undress."

"Sounds all right this time," said Crook.

"Just coincidence, again," agreed Miss Pettigrew. Her tone was so acid that Crook could feel his own teeth begin to grate.

"Unless he just talked her into her grave. But that ain't an indictable ofiEense under British Law. He stayed late enough."

"A little after eleven. Yes, that was late for Miss Bond."

"He didn't get back till close on midnight. Still, he said he'd been communing with the ocean. That might explain it. Well, I suppose I may as well follow his example and get back to London myself."

"You mean you are going at once?" Miss Pettigrew's mingled astonishment and contempt jabbed Crook into saying: "It happens to be where I earn my living. Nobody's paying me to string along in this case. 'Course, if you rang me up to tell me you dropped a little dose of whatsit into her milk and you want me to show you were at the pictures at the time, I'm your man. But if it's just for the pleasure of my company …"

There was a brief pause. "Mr. Crook," said Miss Pettigrew in a voice that would have frozen the phoenix, "we are speaking of a dead woman."

"So we are," agreed Crook contritely. This frosty old dame was his sole connection with the affair, and for all his reckless threats, he had no intention of not seeing it through, and he reminded himself that he was sometimes called Mr. Cautious Crook, and this was one of the occasions when he should live up to his name. "What's the doctor say?"

"He has not yet arrived. I confess I am worried." "No responsibility of yours, is it?"

"In a sense, yes. It is—it was—my practice to go along to Miss Bond's room for a few minutes before I undressed each night for a few last words with her and perhaps to discuss plans for the following day. Last evening Mr. Sherren came along to my room to say that she did not wish to see anyone, as she was tired. I confess at the time I had no reason to suppose the message anything but a genuine one, and indeed I have no such reason now. But I cannot help knowing that if I had followed my usual custom, in spite of what Mr. Sherren said, we might not now be faced with this sudden tragedy,"

"How come?" inquired Crook, politely.

"Had I gone along at eleven o'clock, which is the time Mr. Sherren left me, it might not have been too late to take some action which would have saved Miss Bond's life. Of course, when she was discovered this morning, life had been extinct for several hours."

"You mustn't be too sensitive," Crook told her. "You don't have to be your brother's keeper."

"It is ironic to reflect that she asked me down here for purposes of self-protection, and it is while I am under the same roof that she has met her death."

"Life's full of coincidences," said Crook, comfortingly. "That's what these highbrow novelists like John Sherren won't admit. Look here, like me to come around? No, don't thank me. Pleasure is mine."

He bounced off in a state of delightful anticipation. He knew there was nothing in it for him at all, but he reminded himself that outsiders do sometimes romp home.

Before John returned to Brakemouth Dr. Munster had made his examination and passed sentence.

"I suppose," said Miss Pettigrew, with very much the air of being in charge of the situation, "any additional excitement might be responsible for this collapse?"

Dr. Munster, who disliked Miss Pettigrew on sight and saw no reason why he should conceal the fact (she wasn't a resident and was unlikely to come on his panel under any Social Security measure) said drily: "If you call an overdose of pheno-barbitone additional excitement —well, yes. But I can't give a certificate, because that's what she died of, and a coroner will have to establish how she came to take it."

And off he went, leaving Hammond a prey to the deepest gloom. Miss Pettigrew even more thoughtful than usual, and all the lady residents twittering with a pleasure they hardly tried to conceal. She'd been poisoned, she'd committed suicide, it was a bad conscience, it was history repeating itself; don't forget her sister, there's something in heredity after all …

They hadn't had such a good time since VE Day, when Mr. Hammond had stood everybody a drink in the bar, and served wine with dinner, all free of charge.

16

IT WAS becoming quite monotonous. Each time he came back from visiting an aged relative, John Sherren was, as it were, greeted by a summons to attend that relative's inquest. It had happened in the case of the old Colonel, in the earlier case of unfortunate Isabel Bond, and now, as he lugged his suitcase up Crispin Street, having brought it by bus for economy's sake as far as the corner, he found his landlady on the doorstep waving a telegram.

Your Aunt Clara collapsed heart failure return immediately. Pettigrew.

"Heart failure," he repeated, and in a louder tone he added: "I had a hunch something was wrong. She was so very strange last night, as if—as if some spring of action had suddenly run down."

"She was quite an old lady, wasn't she? And sometimes it's a mercy when the call comes before they get helpless. I remember my dear mother …"

"Quite," said John. "I'm afraid this means I shall have to go back at once."

Mrs. Pringle laid affectionate hands on his suitcase. "You don't stir outside of this house without you've something in your inside," she assured him. "We don't want you fainting by the road and yours is a delicate family, get giddy like your poor Aunt Isabel or took queer like the old lady you've just left. There was a telephone call, too, before the telegram, that was."

"Who did that come from?"

"A Miss Letty Crewe, it sounded like. When Mr. Sherren arrives, says she, speaking ever so short, thought I was the housemaid, I dare say …"

"Quite," said John who knew his Mrs. Pringle. "What did she say?"

"Same as the telegram. Come back at once, she said, and that's all very well, I told her, but Mr. Sherren's a gentleman with important work to do, and if the old lady's passed on …"

"Quite," said John for the third time. "Did she actually say that?"

"To tell you the truth she was a bit hard to hear, but I certainly thought she said something about a funeral, so I thought to myself if it's a funeral someone must be dead, and it isn't likely …"

"Have you a time-table, Mrs Pringle?" inquired John. His heart was pounding with excitement. "This doesn't surprise me, doesn't surprise me at all. I must, of course, return at once."

"Now, come in, Mr. Sherren, and have a breather. Here's the kettle boiling away, and here's the milk and the sugar …"

John found the time-table and began to look up trains. All over, he was thinking, Aunt Clara dead. Of course he must go down, try and get a word with Twemlow. A pity the old chap was always so antagonistic, offensive even … He began to wonder about his own future.

"I'm sure you're looking as white as a sheet," said Mrs. Pringle. "Now, plenty of sugar, go on, help yourself, none of that nasty saccharine in this house. How were things in your hotel?" she added jealously.

"I had to have saccharine there," acknowledged John.

"Didn't bring any back here, I hope?"

"I threw the empty tube away last night as I came out of the drawing room, I shall have to get some more, though, if I'm going down again."

"Not you," said Mrs. Pringle firmly. "You'll take a nice supply of sugar with you. What you want, Mr. Sherren, is a woman to look after you."

Wrong, he thought, all wrong. What he wanted was a service flat and a gentleman's gentleman. He wanted it so much he didn't observe the odd expression on Mrs. Pringle's face. She was thinking: There, drat it! Another hint and he's taken no more notice than a babe unborn. Aloud she said with sudden fierceness: "Who's this Miss Crewe that rang up?"

"Oh, a buddy of Aunt Clara. A most alarming old woman. I must say if the Amazons looked like that I'm not surprised they defeated their enemies." He finished his tea, ate one biscuit and hurried upstairs to change his coat for a seemly black one, and put some clean socks and handkerchiefs into a small case. When he came down there was a taxi at

the door. He hurled himself into the taxi and was just in time to catch the Brakemouth train. It was a slow one, and he had plenty of time to think. Still, he had plenty to think about, so he didn't find the journey too long.

At the hotel the tension had increased. After hearing what Dr. Munster had to say, Mr, Hammond very reluctantly communicated with the police. A death in a hotel is unpopular, but a death that is probably going to turn out a suicide is definitely unlucky. For an instant Mr. Hammond thought he'd have preferred murder. There's less superstition about it, anyway. When the police came they had a word with the doctor, who made it clear he had no time to lose, and had anyway nothing to add to his original blunt statement. He had not seen Miss Bond for nearly a year and presumably she had got no worse during that time since she hadn't sent for him or any other medical practitioner. The Inspector next asked for John and was a little annoyed to find he wasn't on the premises. Miss Pettigrew, however, was very competent and made it clear that she regarded the police as employees of the public, from whom reasonable service was to be expected. She told them about

the letters (they found the envelope of the last, which was proof of something though not of what the message contained) and about last night's bridge party, Mr. Marlowe's visit, Mr. Sherren's departure and his warning to her of a change in his aunt's bearing which occasioned him anxiety.

"You noticed the change yourself, Miss Pettigrew?"

"I can't say I did. Not particularly last night, I mean. For some time, ever since the letters started arriving, she has been more nervous, more apprehensive than of old. Then, too, I think her sister's sudden death preyed on her mind, and of course she was by no means a young woman."

Asked, flat out, if she thought Miss Bond the type to commit suicide. Miss Pettigrew replied forcibly that she should have considered it most unlikely. Questioned about Marlowe, she referred them unhesitatingly to John.

In John's absence the police decided to examine Roger Marlowe and were considerably put about to find that he also was missing. Potter next came to the rescue with the information that he'd seen the feller go out a while ago. No, not carrying higgage, but looking as if he were in a bit of a hurry. Most hotels have their Commander Potter, who is a mine of the most trivial information concerning the movements and behavior of all

the other guests.

Potter was inclined to be upstage with the police, who seemed to blame him for not knowing more of Marlowe's movements. After all, he protested, there was still a little freedom left in this damned democracy, and surely a chap could go for a walk without filling ij up a form. The police withdrew and called for Major Atkins, but he couldn't help them much either. He hadn't known the deceased well, he said, but she'd seemed to him much the same as usual on the previous night. She'd played a devilish good game of bridge and swept the board.

By twelve o'clock Mr. Hammond was beginning to feel anxious. Marlowe had arranged to turn out of his room by midday andl when it came to packing Marlowe's things, however, all thc| drawers were empty and the solitary shabby suitcase containec practically nothing. Hammond, a man of experience, realized at] once how things were and knew he'd have to cut his losses. Hel did, however, feel an odd twinge, remembering that it was the] dead woman who had, as he understood it, vouched for this scoundrel, and for the first time he began to wonder whether the inquest would be the comparatively simple affair he had at first anticipated. He trembled for the reputation of his beautiful hotel.

John arrived immediately after lunch, having had a very expensive and not very satisfactory meal en route. He hoped for a quiet word with Twemlow, who would presumably have been sent for, and by the time he arrived, the police had their claws thoroughly into John, so that he wriggled like an impaled mouse. When he heard the cause of death he stared at them all in incredulous dismay.

"Pheno-barbitone tablets?" he exclaimed. "Are you—are you sure?"

"Dr. Munster and the police surgeon are in no doubt at all."

"I thought you could only get those things on a doctor's prescription."

"Exactly."

"You mean, my aunt had a prescription?"

"You didn't know that, Mr. Sherren?"

"My aunt was not exactly a confiding person. But I can tell you one thing: that is, if you're interested in a psychological observation."

"What's that, sir?"

"If you've got any ideas in your head that this might be suicide, you can forget them. My aunt was a very religious woman. Anyway, so far as

I'm aware, she had no motive, except, of course, the letters."

"Which letters would those be, sir?"

"I thought Miss Pettigrew would have told you."

"There might be more than one set," the Inspector pointed out.

"By Jove, you're right. There were."

"How do you know that?" The Inspector snapped into rigid attention.

"I heard Marlowe—you've seen Marlowe, of course? No? That's damned odd—I came into the drawing room last night in time to hear him say something about his offer remaining open till midday today and something about letters. He was engaged in a way to my Aunt Isabel, you know, but it never came to anything. I suppose he was referring to letters she had written to him."

"And that's all you heard?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Sherren, I understand your aunt asked you to stay with her last night when every one else had retired. Did she have anything special to tell you?"

"She only said this might be her last opportunity. I asked her what she meant by that and she said that at her age and in her state of health it was never safe to count on the future, or words to that effect. No, I don't recall that she told me anything of importance."

Questioned more closely, he described as well as he could remember the events of the late evening. "She was very sleepy and somehow seemed broken. I simply thought she'd stayed up too late, but …" He hesitated.

"But you told Miss Pettigrew you expected some development?"

"I asked her to keep in touch. I was Miss Bond's only living relative."

"Quite so, Mr. Sherren. But of course you didn't really anticipate that anything of this kind would happen?"

"How should I?" demanded John quickly. "I've told you, she seemed to me very tired and not quite herself. I suppose she was feeling hazy and took an overdose of sleeping tablets—I suppose that's what she had the stuff for—entirely by accident. Is there any way of checking up on how many she had?"

"We've found the little phial in which she kept them. It was in her bag, quite empty."

"I suppose," said John carefully, "she took them after she went into her room. She asked me for a glass of water."

"You didn't see her take them?"

"No."

"According to Miss Pettigrew she was one of those people who can't swallow the smallest pill dry. She had to have water to wash them down. The obvious thing would be to put the pellets into the water and drink it off."

"Probably she did, then." John was looking both puzzled and wary.

"In that case there should be traces of the pheno-barbitone in the glass, but there are none. On the other hand, Mr. Sherren, thanks to the upset this affair has caused on the premises, the domestic routine is rather confused, and in consequence we were able to

examine the tray of cups used by Miss Bond's party for their tea last night. One of those cups contains a sediment that has been identified as pheno-barbitone."

John saw what the Inspector was driving at. He was a novelist to whom almost all things were possible, but even he drew the line at suggesting that a lady intending to commit suicide would take her fatal dose around a tea-table with three people looking on. And yet, wasn't that just the sort of trick Aunt Clara might play? And how monstrous that on this night of all nights the cups should not have been washed? He said lamely: "It must have been an accident."

"A very queer sort of accident," suggested the Inspector. His next question gave John a worse shock than ever. "Mr. Sherren, have you any pheno-barbitone in your possession?"

"I?" John's voice squeaked like a slate pencil. "Of course not. Why should I? I never require sleeping pills."

"Then do you know what it looks like? You've seen it, I dare say."

"No. No. Not so far as I recall."

"It's a very small pill; it might by the careless or the uninitiated be confounded with saccharine."

"Saccharinel" John drew a deep breath. They'd got there now. Then he babbled eagerly: "Of course it was an accident. It's easy to see now how it happened. She must have put it in her tea thinking it was saccharine …"

But the Inspector countered that with a stern: "I understand Miss

Bond always had sugar supplied by the management. She didn't take it for herself."

"Don't blame her," muttered John. "I don't have it unless I'm compelled."

"You had some saccharine with you last night, I believe?"

"Just for emergencies."

"And—you offered some to your aunt to sweeten her tea?"

"And got heartily cursed for my pains. How was I to know she had a supply of sugar in her bag for her own use?"

"You brought your saccharine from London, Mr. Sherren?"

"No. I never use it in London, but they are remarkably parsimonious with the sugar at my hotel here. I got it from one of the shops in the High Street."

"And doubtless you still have it on you?"

"Well—no—as a matter of fact, I finished it last night. I threw the empty container into the waste-paper basket in the hall as we came out after playing bridge."

"I see." The Inspector made a note to check up on that. John couldn't think how a man with the Inspector's unimaginative countenance could find so many new points to raise; and of course he was hampered by a sense of guilt and a terror of betraying what he knew. At last they let him go.

"You'll be remaining in Brakemouth for the next few days, of course, Mr. Sherren," they said, and he, with an assumption of ease he was far from feeling, said cheerily, well, yes, he'd have to stay for the inquest, wouldn't he? The last relation and the last person to see her alive. But the Inspector was evasive. They hadn't got all the evidence yet. This chap Marlowe … And so, after a time they let him go, with the air of cats indulgently watching a mouse hurry ofiE toward its hole, knowing that before it reaches the woodwork a long curving paw will come out and scoop the poor little victim back to the prison it believes it has escaped.

"Funny nobody mentioned finding the empty saccharine bottle in the waste-paper basket," suggested the Sergeant.

"The worst of amateur witnesses is you never can be sure where you are with them. They might have thrown out half a dozen bottles without thinking anything of it."

However, the contents of the waste-paper basket were still on the

premises—another point an amateur witness might easily overlook—and there wasn't a saccharine bottle or tube in any of them.

17

AS JOHN emerged from Mr. Hammond's private room, where the inquiries were taking place, he discovered Mr. Twemlow sitting in the lobby cheek by jowl with Mr. Crook. They were both short men, but there the likeness ended. Mr. Twemlow looked as though he might have been carved out of a walnut shell; Crook looked like a huge advertisement for somebody's succulent ham. Nevertheless, they seemed to be getting on remarkably well.

John was so much surprised by this improbable juxtaposition that he exclaimed, without preamble: "I didn't realize you had come, Mr. Twemlow," And then to Crook: "So you're still at Brakemouth. Between you, you ought to put the place on the map."

Twemlow looked as if such vulgarity was beneath his notice, but Crook didn't take offense easily.

"Called into consultation by Miss Pettigrew," he said in insufferably smug tones. John was astounded, as the speaker had anticipated, and he sounded even more insufferable than Crook.

"Miss Pettigrew? I wonder what she imagines she stands to lose."

"You must ask Mr. Twemlow that. He was your aunt's man of affairs."

Mr. Twemlow looked outraged. "It is perhaps a little soon to be discussing the provisions of the will. That is usually left until after the funeral; but since Mr, Sherren is so anxious for information and I should be sorry to keep him in suspense, I may say that neither Miss Pettigrew nor anyone else stands to lose or win anything by Miss Bond's death. I shall count myself exceedingly fortunate if the amount standing to my late client's credit is sufficient to cover the expenses unfortunately inseparable from an event of this nature."

"I don't understand," John stammered. "I mean—my aunt was, I have always understood, very comfortably off."

Mr. Twemlow's expression said that clearly he hadn't understood much.

"I dare say you know the provisions of the late Colonel Bond's will," encouraged Crook.

John, who had sneaked into Somerset House some time ago in order to acquaint himself with his own expectations, muttered something unintelligible.

"A very curiously worded will, as I am sure Mr. Sherren will agree," said Mr. Twemlow, who could put even Miss Pettigrew in her place. "The Colonel provided that all of which he died possessed should go to his daughter, Clara, on the understanding that she made a home for her younger sister, Isabel. If, however, Isabel should marry, then she was to receive as her portion one-half of the capital then standing in Miss Bond's name. You perceive the flaw, of course."

Crook did, even if John didn't. "Miss B. bein' left in full control of the capital? I get you. Nothing to prevent her selling out before the old man was cold in his grave, and settin' up a racin' stable on her own account."

Mr. Twemlow permitted himself to smile, still completely ignoring the hapless John. You might have thought that years of such treatment at the hands of every one except his landladies, who were never left in ignorance of the fact that one day he would be soundly independent, would have hardened him, but it hadn't. He was as sensitive and ill at ease as he had been twenty years ago. Only as the lawyer's story unfolded did he feel his heart, that had dropped into his stomach with Twemlow's first words, sink into his neatly pointed, perfectly polished gent's black shoes. Because the story Twemlow was now telling simply couldn't be true. He could believe a good deal about his Aunt Clara, but not this, not that she had, so to speak, beggared herself and her sister for the sake of a comparative stranger, for the most rabidly sentimental reason any romantic novelist ever conceived.

Yet that was what Mr. Twemlow actually was saying.

"Aunt Clara quixotic?" gasped John. "You might as easily believe in Molotov becoming a regular Yes-man."

"That's what's wrong with the world," Crook reproved him. "No

faith left. Don't you believe in miracles, Mr. Sherren? I thought there was no end to what you writing chaps could stomach."

"If we might have some details," whispered John, weak with distress and indignation. He'd seen the will himself. There had been no mention of any other name. So how could he or the Colonel or poor, deceived Isabel dream that when the old lady breathed her last there wouldn't be any capital at all?

Yet that was what Mr. Twemlow was telling them. "When the Colonel had his last illness, the doctor, in the teeth of Miss Bond's objections, insisted on sending in a nurse. I didn't meet the lady myself, but she was apparently not merely competent but sympathetic enough to attract the Colonel's interest to an unusual extent. The first I knew of the situation was when I received a letter from the Colonel telling me he wished to make a fresh will, dividing his money equally between this lady on the one hand and his two daughters on the other. He said that, had circumstances been more propitious, he would have asked her to marry him, but since that was out of the question, he wanted to be sure that she would be provided for for the future. I never actually saw the lady, but I gather she was not exactly in the first bloom of her youth. Miss Bond would then be about thirty years of age, and this lady was probably her contemporary. I felt it my duty to point out to my client that such a suggestion was exceedingly unfair to his daughters and moreover would help the nurse less than he supposed, since when the information became public property, which would inevitably be the case, a good deal of gossip would attach itself to her name. It was even possible that Miss Bond would bring an action on the ground of undue influence."

"Did that move the old gentleman?" asked Crook, enchanted by this development, which was precisely his cup of tea.

"It moved him to a still more precipitate action. He wrote that he appreciated my forethought for the lady—I regret that I do not recall her name—and in the circumstances he was arranging to go through the marriage ceremony, so that there should be no possibility of her being defrauded of what he chose to consider her rights."

John had been listening to this story with a face of absolute anguish.

"But that wouldn't help," he exclaimed. "The tongues would wag faster than ever."

"Ah, but it's one thing to proceed against a scheming nurse and quite

another when said nurse has become a wife," Crook warned him. "Don't tell me he actually pulled it off?"

"He did not, but that was because he was suddenly carried ofiE by a heart attack before he could put his plan into action. Well, there was nothing very surprising about that …"

"But damned convenient for Miss Bond," suggested Crook, putting John's thoughts into words.

"Quite," agreed Mr. Twemlow dryly. "The surprising thing came later, when she wrote to me that she wished the provisions of her father's unsigned will to be carried out."

Even Crook was silenced for a minute by that; the more impetuous John burst out: "I don't believe it. Why should she?"

"That's the point," Crook agreed. "Why should she? You say he hadn't signed the new will?"

"He didn't intend to do that until he was actually married."

"Then there can't be any question of Miss Bond destroyin' it. Now, now, my dear chap, keep that face for your clients. You and me know what the world is. Miss Bond didn't give away half her fortune without she had to. And if she had to do that it was because this woman had something on her. Question is, what could it, be?"

"I have sometimes wondered," Mr. Twemlow conceded with unusual recklessness.

"Good luck to you," crowed Crook. "But her nephew and me, we don't have to wonder. We're pretty sure we know."

John, taken aback by this correct reading of his mind, began to stammer an incoherent denial.

"No, no, I didn't say a word. I mean, it's out of the question—I realize, of course, you're hinting at blackmail …" He stopped there, remembering the old saying that history repeats itself, and at the time of her death Miss Bond was still being blackmailed. "But this was her own father." '7bAnd here his inconvenient , memory banged at the door to say. And the last time it was her own sister, wasn't it?) He felt himself caught up in a whirlpool. "She couldn't," he concluded weakly. "It's unthinkable."

"Only putting on the clock a little," urged Crook, unabashed. "Well, there had to be some motive, and what else could nursie have held over her head?"

They thought about that for a moment, then John said thinly: “What, in effect, did Miss Bond do for this nurse?”

“She carried out her father’s wishes. Half the capital was to be made over to this lady; on the other half she and Miss Isabel would live. That had been her father’s intention, and to that, she insisted, she would adhere.”

“Had Papa confided in her?” asked Crook. And answered his own question. “Yes, of course he must have—or else she found out by irregular means. Did Miss Isabel know?”

“Miss Bond enjoined me most earnestly never to let her sister know the facts. She must think they could continue to live on their previous comfortable scale. The income, of course, deteriorated considerably during the war, and when it became obvious that

these various social-service schemes were to come into being, she took my advice and sold out all her remaining investments—she had had to call some in during the war to meet current expenses— and purchased an annuity on which she and her sister lived as simply as possible until Miss Isabel’s death.”

“Suppose the sister had suddenly decided to get married? That would have let the cat out of the bag,” said Crook.

Mr. Twemlow smoothed his neat upper lip with his neat little fingers.

“Fortunately that contingency did not arise. If it had. Miss Bond would have been compelled to warn her that she would be a dow-erless bride, apart from the very small interest she had under her mother’s will, and unfortunately very few of those shares have been paying their way since 1939.”

“No wonder …” began John, and stopped.

“Pray continue,” said Mr. Twemlow.

“I meant, no wonder she didn’t encourage suitors for Aunt Isabel.”

“I always understood that Miss Isabel was delicate, not only physically but mentally. Marriage, therefore, was out of the question.”

“She must have been as tough as an ostrich egg to have stood up to the old lady all those years,” objected Crook. “Still, you do see Miss Bond’s point. She might have found herself in quite a spot if she’d had to tell the truth.”

“Yes, indeed,” agreed John, his voice choked with fury.

Twemlow was looking from one to the other with little hostile eyes.

"I should point out that you have no grounds for the amazing suggestion you have made," he observed.

"Don't give me one of your old-fashioned looks, Twemlow," Crook said pleasantly. "You know what I mean. When did you ever know the old girl to make a gesture like that? I bet she was the kind that brings out last year's poppy on November the eleventh, and then you're asking us to believe she'd part with half her ill-gotten gains just to reverence her daddy's memory."

Mr. Twemlow shivered. It seemed obvious that such an explanation had not previously occurred to him.

"I—I can hardly believe …" he mumbled.

"It was mighty convenient for Miss Bond that the old gentleman died when he did, or would have been if nursie hadn't had something on her. That's the worst of these amateurs," he continued, blissfully disregarding Mr. Twemlow's horrified attempts at interruption, "they think nobody's goin' to be as clever as they are. No, I think it's pretty safe to assume the old lady slipped up and the other gold-digger on the premises was on her neck at once, and eventually they settled down and decided to diwy the swag."

"Murder is murder—since you appear to prefer plain speaking, sir—even if the victim's expectation of life is no more than a few days," Mr. Twemlow pointed out severely.

"Just what I'm trying to tell you," said Crook, looking a little bit injured.

"If that's true," said John thoughtfully, "it would make it much easier to understand about Aunt Isabel. I never understood how someone so afraid of heights as she was came to fall over the edge of a balcony."

"You're coming on," said Crook, admiringly. "First you suggest that the old lady gave the old gentleman a helping hand to the tomb and now you think she followed it up …"

"Well, Aunt Isabel was talking of getting married," John defended himself. "And what would have happened then? She'd have to have learned the truth, and if she didn't put two and two together, you can be sure Marlowe would. If Marlowe had learned what Mr. Twemlow has just told us, the matter wouldn't simply be whispered about among ourselves, it would be shouted from the housetops. She'd never have lived that down. I think Mr. Twemlow should tell his story to the police," continued

John, excitedly. “It would provide them with a motive for self-destruction. Oh, I know I told them I didn’t believe Aunt Clara would ever take her own life, but then I didn’t know the facts. No one knows what Aunt Clara told Aunt Isabel about Marlowe. She may have thought life was worth nothing if she was just to go on being Clara Bond’s sister for the rest of her days. There are more ways of killing people than deliberately laying hands on them.”

Here Mr. Twemlow managed to get a word in edgewise. “You clearly have no knowledge of law, Mr. Sherren, The law requires proof of accusations, far less serious accusations than these. The doctor gave a certificate of death from natural causes in the case of

Colonel Bond; the jury brought in a verdict of death by misadventure in the case of his daughter, Isabel.”

“Ah,” said Crook, on an unwontedly serious note, “and what’s the jury going to say about the death of Miss Clara? That’s what we’re concerned with, and if anyone likes to bet a pony …”

But no one accepted the challenge. Even Crook was grave as a judge now.

“Marlowe,” began John after a minute, and: “Hold everything,” said Crook. “Speak of the devil. Here he is.”

18

THE swing door of the hotel opened and Marlowe came in, accompanied by a plain-clothes man. Marlowe was perfectly at his ease. When he came abreast of the three in the lobby, he said: "Hallo, Sherren, this is an unexpected development, isn't it? Not that I'm particularly surprised myself. I thought the old lady was in a considerable dither …"

"It was that last letter," said John, with a glibness that surprised himself.

Marlowe's brows went up. "Letter? Another of the anonymous ones she spoke about? I didn't know …"

The man at his side touched his arm, "The Inspector's waiting, Mr. Marlowe," he said, and they moved on.

In Hammond's room the Inspector said sharply: "Mr. Marlowe, why did you leave the hotel so hurriedly as soon as you heard of Miss Bond's death?"

"I was expecting a letter containing a remittance." As Mary had Calais engraved on her heart so would Roger Marlowe have this phrase carved on his. He had never been anywhere without using it at the end. "I'd given the post office here as my address. I didn't know where I'd be staying. In fact, if I hadn't contacted Miss Bond in the hall here I might have been sleeping on the beach."

"Had the remittance arrived?"

"As a matter ol fact it hadn't. Damned inconvenient," said Marlowe. "Got delayed in the post, I suppose. I shall have to have a

word with the manager here. I'm temporarily pressed, thanks to this hold-up. Of course, if Miss Bond were here she'd have franked me all right, but, as I say, it's very unfortunate. Mind you, it's not surprising. Heart failure …"

"It wasn't heart failure. It was an overdose of a sedative."

He looked up, a startled expression on his face. "Is that so? Poor old lady. Well, well, who'd have thought it?"

"Thought what, Mr. Marlowe?"

"She'd have thrown up the sponge after all these years. I thought she was tough right through."

"It hasn't been decided that it was suicide," the Inspector reminded him dryly. "That'll be for the coroner to say."

Marlowe looked dubious. "A mistake? She wasn't that sort, I'd have said."

"And you knew her well?"

"I knew her sister. She talked a good deal about Miss Bond, and of course I had met her two or three times. She gave me the impression that even if she was old she was anything but ga-ga."

"Mr. Marlowe, did you come down to Brakemouth for the express purpose of seeing Miss Bond?"

"I? why on earth … ?"

"You were overheard to say last night that your offer remained open until midday today. What offer was that?"

"She had said something about going to the police about some letters, and I offered to accompany her. I thought an old lady like that …"

"You didn't know her nephew was down here and was available if she had wanted help?"

"I don't think we discussed her nephew, but in any case she said she was quite capable of managing her own affairs. She was a tart old lady and she knew her own mind."

"Did she tell you what these letters were?"

He had to think fast. He knew nothing of the letters the Inspector had in mind, but was it possible that the Inspector knew something about Isabel's? His first action, when he knew Clara Bond was dead, was to destroy the letters. He had packed them into the pockets of his overcoat and gone out to a solitary place on the cliffs. Here he had burnt the lot. For form's sake he had inquired

at the post office, in case the police checked up on his story, but the remittance didn't exist. He wondered if the poKce believed a word of his story and decided most likely they didn't. All these considerations flashed through his mind while the Inspector waited for his reply.

"She didn't show them to me, but I gather they were letters of a threatening nature. I know all about speaking no harm of the dead, but I'd say she was a lady with plenty of enemies."

"And she confided all this to you, Mr. Marlowe?" The Inspector knew he was up against a man almost as good in his own line as he, the Inspector, was in his, a man, moreover, who was in a very strong position, since he wasn't deterred by scruples.

"Oh, the letters exist all risjht," he said. "We found them in her bag. There was another last night …"

"After I saw her?"

"Yes."

"Well, perhaps that may have clinched things."

"There's one point you perhaps don't appreciate, Mr. Marlowe, and that is that the sleeping draught was taken in the tea she drank downstairs —before she had seen the last letter."

"Curiouser and curiouser," said Marlowe. "I'm afraid I can't help you. Inspector."

"And your offer only remained open till midday today?"

"I was proposing to leave Brakemouth immediately after lunch."

"Well, naturally you realize that's out of the question until after the inquest."

Marlowe shrugged. "If you can persuade the manager to house me free of charge," he said.

"But surely—your remittance. It must come in the afternoon post."

"No must about it," said Marlowe. "Up in town I could have made inquiries in person."

"The telephone," suggested the Inspector.

"You know how it is. Some clerk says the matter's being looked into. You get no satisfaction from long-distance calls."

"Mr. Hammond may not be prepared to agree to your leaving Brakemouth without settling your bill."

The Inspector didn't appear to be looking at Marlowe, yet he

perceived the precisely identical change overwhelm those thin features as had shocked and intimidated old Miss Bond the night before.

"So that's the attitude you propose to take up?"

"This may turn out to be a very serious case, Mr. Marlowe. You don't need me to tell you that. Until after the inquest I should prefer all

the witnesses to remain in the neighborhood."

"Anything else I can do for you at the moment?" Marlowe snatched up his hat.

"Just one more point. What time did you go upstairs last night?"

"About ten-thirty. I understand it was the porter's last trip. Miss Pettigrew and one or two other people came up with me, if you want confirmation."

"Then, as you passed through the hall, did you happen to see a letter addressed to Miss Bond on the table?"

"As a matter of fact I didn't, but you can't draw any conclusions from that. I wasn't expecting any mail myself, not at Green-glades, that is, so I shouldn't notice if there was any for anyone else."

Crook wasn't a psychologist, but even he would have made something out of that admission, and presumably the Inspector did the same. All the Inspector said, however, was that he hadn't any more questions at the moment, adding that he would like Marlowe to keep in touch for the next day or two.

When Marlowe came into the hall, Twemlow and John had vanished, but Mr. Crook still sat in his armchair, like the hotel mascot. When he saw Marlowe he said "Any luck? The Inspector seems to be taking the hair off most of his witnesses."

"It's what he's paid for," said Marlowe, with his pleasant, public-school smile. "It looks like a clear case of suicide to me."

"Any reason why she should obligingly put herself out of the way?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. What about these letters everyone's speaking of? Mind you, I never saw them, but she was upset about something, all right. Spoke of going to the police this morning …"

"And then puts herself in a situation where the police have to come to her? Don't add up to me. I'd say someone was pretty damn anxious she shouldn't go to the police."

Marlowe relaxed by inches. "Trust a lawyer to look on the black side," he suggested. "Still, if that's so there's a sort of rough justice about it. I've always believed she had a hand in her sister's death, even if she didn't actually push her off the balcony."

"I get you." Crook nodded. "All the same, I wouldn't pull that one at the inquest. You were goin' to marry the lady, weren't you?"

"I was, if that accident hadn't happened. It's enough to make any

man suspicious."

"Didn't attend that inquest?" suggested Crook.

"No. I didn't know till after the funeral. My letter was answered by Miss Bond, but she took good care not to post it for a couple of days." He looked speculatively at Crook. "You know a lot more than you say, don't you?"

Then the Inspector came out of Mr. Hammond's room and looked at them curiously. Crook nodded and strolled off. Marlowe went out of the hotel, feeling he was under police supervision. The least relaxation from the law would be dangerous now.

"Have to trust my luck," he told himself stoutly, and sure enough it stood him in good stead. He was passing The Running Horse when a voice hailed him by name, and there was Crook inviting him in and saying, "What's yours?" in a voice that made him certain there'd be luncheon to follow, even though it was improbable he'd raise a loan. His spirits lifted at once. If the police chose to keep him here for their convenience, they could settle his hotel bill. And what a relief to know that for once he needn't act a part. No sense trying to bamboozle this tough lawyer from London. After two or three drinks he loosened up.

"Marriage," he said, "is the most delightful of the impermanen-cies of life."

For which observation alone Crook thought his money on drinks had been well laid out.

Meanwhile the police were at work tracing the anonymous letter. Whoever laid it on that table had to pass die desk coming or going, and any stranger would attract attention. It seemed pretty certain that the letter had been left where it was found by someone, who, if not actually a resident, was known to the management. The reception clerk went off duty at ten-fifteen, but Hart was on duty until ten-thirty, and neither he nor any of the members of the final party he took upstairs, consisting of Miss Pettigrew, Commander and Mrs. Potter, Mr. Marlowe, and a lady called Fisher, had any recollection of seeing the letter in the hall. It appeared, therefore, either that the letter had been brought into the hotel between ten-thirty and, say, ten forty-five, when John and Miss Bond left the small drawing room, or else someone, a resident, had slipped into the hall after Hart had made his final journey to the upper floors, and left the letter where it was subsequently found.

If he knew no other text in the Bible, the Inspector was well acquainted with the one about patience having her perfect work. Halted at one end he began inquiries at the other, and so, to the surprise of most of the protagonists, he netted his fish.

19

UP IN Maida Vale Mrs. Pringle was giving her pet lodger's room a thorough doing when she was disturbed by the front doorbell. Two strange gentlemen stood on the doorstep. To one less experienced than John's devoted landlady they might have seemed merely business gentlemen seeking accommodation, but Mrs. Pringle was not deceived for an instant. She knew they were police. She'd had police on her step once before when Mr. Pringle thoughtlessly got in the way of a heavy van.

Her hand flew to her heart. "It's not Mr. Sherren?" she faltered.

"Mr. Sherren? Why should you think we want him?"

"It wouldn't be any good if you did, 'cause he's not here. Gone down to Brakemouth about his auntie. Poor old lady. Heart, it was. But what did you want with me," she continued fiercely, "if nothing's happened to him?"

"Nothing's happened to Mr. Sherren," said the official, "but perhaps we may come in for a moment. I understand it was you who took the first message about Miss Bond's death."

Mrs. Pringle began to feel a little more important. "Suppose I did?" she said truculently.

"A telephone call and then a telegram. Is that right?"

She couldn't remember inviting them in but here they were standing in her hall. They seemed polite enough, she acknowledged grudgingly.

"And when Mr. Sherren arrived, you told him at once, of course, Mrs. Pringle?"

"Of course. And he said he must go back right away."

"Without even coming into the house?"

"I believe he would have done so, but I said no sense him getting ill, too, and he came in and had a cup of tea and then he went up to change

his coat …"

"How many coats has he got?" inquired the second man as Mrs. Pringle paused for breath.

"How many do you suppose he has eight years after the war? If you were thinking Mr. Sherren is in the black market—he wouldn't think of it, of course, and it's very expensive, I believe, and anyway I wouldn't …"

"Was there any special reason why he should change his coat?" the detective asked. "Did he say anything? Perhaps he'd torn the one he was wearing or there was a hole in the pocket …"

"I always keep Mr. Sherren's things nice," said Mrs. Pringle, with dignity. "Not having a wife, you see, he needs someone to look after him. So when he's out I just go through his things, a stitch here and a stitch there—saving nine you understand …"

Mrs. Pringle went on explaining that she had mended a shirt that John had brought back and a little hole in his coat pocket and she'd hurried up and given the black coat a brush, seeing it was a funeral… .

The first of the plain-clothes men metaphorically choked Mrs. Pringle and said they'd be obliged if she would show them his room.

"Not without he's in it," returned Mrs. Pringle loftily.

The man produced a warrant. Mrs. Pringle turned pale.

Very reluctantly she took them upstairs. John had a fair-sized sitting room furnished with solid Victorian pieces, few of which matched, and a much smaller, darker room where he slept. Mrs. Pringle showed a tendency to linger on the threshold, but one of the detectives closed the door firmly and hung his hat over the keyhole. There was a large writing-table in the window and some bookshelves holding some modern verse, a few novels by acknowledged highbrows, and a shelf of solid-looking books dealing

for the most part with famous trials. No detective stories, though; it was obvious that Mr. Sherren preferred fact to fiction. While they went through the rooms the two men talked quietly.

"If these chaps knew how to keep their mouths shut," said one, "they'd save themselves a lot of trouble. I suppose he thought he was safe saying he'd chucked the saccharine bottle away. He didn't think of them checking up on that. Now, if he'd said he found it in his pocket on the way up to town and chucked it out of the window he'd have been all right."

“I suppose even John Sherren isn’t such a fool he’d expect an official to believe that.”

After a prolonged search, however, the two men had to admit they’d found nothing incriminating at all. When Mrs. Pringle, unable to contain herself any longer, looked in to ask if they could do with a cup of tea, they asked her if her lodger ever took anything to make him sleep.

She said with dignity: “I don’t know what you’re thinking, but this is a respectable house and no, nothing except aspirin.”

They pushed her out again, saying they’d be down in a minute. It was a baffling case. You couldn’t get away from the fact that John Sherren had emptied some minute pellets into his aunt’s cup of tea and—this was a striking point—had carefully refrained from putting any pellets from the same bottle into his own cup. True, he said he had none left and in any case Miss Bond produced her tin of sugar just then, and he had helped himself from that. But there was no trace of the bottle itself either in the waste-paper basket in the hall or in the one in his bedroom. The younger of the two men, Romer by name, wandered over to the window where the bookcase stood. His eyes roamed casually over the titles. Suddenly he stiffened.

“Jenks, look here. These books, trials … Remember that chap in the thirties who murdered a fellow for the sake of his insurance money—he was an agent of some company …”

“Where’s the parallel here?” interrupted Jenks.

“He was taken to jail and committed suicide by means of a little phial of some acid that he’d contrived to hide in the hem of his overcoat. And do you remember that old girl downstairs saying something about mending a little hole after Sherren got back?”

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Jenks saw the drift and in a flash had hauled the overcoat from its place in the wardrobe and was eagerly examining it.

“There’s been a little hole in the pocket recently mended,” he said excitedly. “The cotton’s a little brighter than the material of the lining.” His fingers strayed down to the hem and he began to feel carefully. “There’s something here,” he announced a moment later. “What we want is a razor blade.” He fished one out of his waistcoat pocket and began carefully cutting the stitches. Romer leaned closer. After a moment a tiny bottle containing a few minute white pellets came to light.

"And if Mrs. Pringle or any one else tries to make out these are aspirin, let her swallow 'em," observed Romer grimly.

In the lobby of Greenglades, Crook, who seemed prepared to do nothing all day, sat exchanging points of view with Marlowe.

Miss Pettigrew entered the hotel in time to hear Marlowe ask blandly, "Do you know, Crook, if the police are any further on in their investigations?"

Marlowe politely drew out a chair for Miss Pettigrew, who looked as though she'd like to kick it through the door, but since that clearly was out of the question she accepted it as ungraciously as she knew how.

"What's your view. Crook?" Marlowe persisted. "Foul play?"

"Have they discovered the author of the anonymous letters?" inquired Miss Pettigrew briskly.

"Do you imagine these letters link up with the murder, assuming it is a murder?" wondered Marlowe aloud.

"Yes, Mr. Crook, do give us your view," encouraged Miss Pettigrew.

"The police don't confide in me, you know, but since you ask me, I'd say that whoever wrote those letters was responsible for the old lady's death, which don't mean he or she dumped the stuff in the teacup. There's more than one way of puttin' out the other fellow's light."

His audience was intelligent enough to grasp his meaning. "You mean, Miss Bond may have been driven to suicide, which makes X morally guilty but innocent in the eyes of the law."

"Innocent of murder," acknowledged Crook. "Mind you, I don't

say this is a case of suicide. I think it's going to be a pot of real unrationed prewar jam for everyone, excepting X, and even there I don't know that the police are going to catch up."

"I never saw those letters," said Marlowe. "Are they any clue to the writer? Any particular style?"

"The only writer among us, so far as my information goes, is little Johnny-Head-In-Air," said Crook. "Personally, I don't know what his style is." He looked across to Miss Pettigrew. "P'raps you've read his breath-takin' romances," he suggested.

Miss Pettigrew tossed her head, looking more like an old brown mare than ever. "I may be independent, Mr. Crook, I may like to take my own way regardless of criticism, but I hope I am not so eccentric as to waste any time reading Mr. Sherren's effusions."

"Pity about that," said Crook blandly. "A bit of eccentricity might have helped us here. Might be able to recognize his style."

"There was nothing in any way individual about those letters," Miss Pettigrew informed him in her sweeping fashion. "Set a thousand people to write anonymous messages in similar circumstances and they would produce almost identical results. A vague threat or two, your life is in danger, a hackneyed quotation to the same effect, a text on the this-night-is-thy-soul-required-of-thee lines, nothing characteristic at all. The only leading point we have is that the writer clearly knew Isabel pretty well, which argues that he or she stands or stood in some personal relationship to her. But then both Mr. Marlowe and myself knew her reasonably well, and we are neither of us, I believe, illiterate. We might, if that were the only test, either of us be responsible for this repellent correspondence."

Like an actor entering on cue, John Sherren pushed open the door of the hotel and walked in. He looked rather paler than usual, less polished, less carefully arrayed to meet the indifference of the world.

"Any news?" he asked them, feeling a stab of apprehension at the sight of the trio seated so cosily in the lobby.

"We were just agreeing it was anybody's rope," replied Crook cordially. "Now, just because it's always as well to be ready for emergencies, you listen to the man who knows. Remember, if any of you three finds himself in the can, and, as I've just said, everything's possible, even the police can make mistakes and you can

tell them I said so—there's one defense that's foolproof, and only one. / don't know, I wasn't there and if I was I don't remember. Go on saying that over and over to yourself till you start saying it in your sleep. The less most chaps in the witness stand remember, the better for them."

"Do you think the police really have one of us in mind?" John demanded. "Oh, but it's absurd! Murder doesn't happen."

In one's own circle, he meant. Crook looked at him pityingly, but Miss Pettigrew got there first.

"That is a remarkable observation to come from you, Mr. Sherren, considering the number of mysterious deaths there have been in your family during the past twelve months."

John looked outraged, but Crook said: "That's what I mean. You need to be like the beasts in the Revelations who had eyes before and behind to keep up with the police when they get an idea into their heads."

“And have they?” asked John, trying to sound indifferent.

The police answered his question for him within the hour. After a telephone conversation with their Metropolitan colleagues, the local authorities, in the shape of Inspector Hyde, to whom John had taken a marked dislike from the first, returned to Greenglades asking for Mr. Sherren. John went to meet the fellow, hoping he looked a lot more composed than he felt. A little later he left the hotel in the company of the Inspector and a police sergeant. They went by car and the sergeant was carrying the small brown suitcase John had brought down from London the day before.

The author in him noted that, in spite of what they told you in detective stories, the accused man doesn’t always have to wear handcuffs.

20

IT IS improbable that John, for all his well meant efforts to please the public with a series of carefully executed novels over a period of years, had ever been half so popular as he was now. Public opinion is a queer thing, as Crook pointed out. While the chase is on, nothing's bad enough for the criminal, but when the police have got him in their clutches, people start feeling sorry for the fellow. A very healthy reaction. I'd be sorry myself for any poor devil Hyde got his hands on. Of course, the stringency of British justice made it improper for any jury to remember that both his other elderly relatives had died in mysterious circumstances immediately following his visits to their homes, but just as you can't hide a light under a bushel, so the entire police force was powerless to silence the press. The journalists, of course, exercised considerable discretion. They simply set down the facts. Readers will recall … and just in case they didn't they recapitulated the odd circumstances. Barring a miracle, Crook confided to Miss Pettigrew, who seemed to have adopted him as her sole confidante, Sherren was in for it.

"Is this the development you anticipated, Mr. Crook? I have been convinced all along you see a move further than the rest of us."

"It don't surprise me. How about you, Miss P.?" "Surely the prosecution will have to show where he obtained the tablets. I understand his defense is that he knew nothing of them." "Planted on him, in fact? Well, onus of proof is with him." "Do you think there is any truth in his contention?" "Now, come. Miss P." Crook laid a hand like a ham on the spinster's thin, tweed-clad arm. "Throw dust in the eyes of that masterful Inspector Hyde, if you like, but remember, I'm dust-proof. I'm dead sure I know where those tablets came from, and your guess is as good as mine. Well, well, it's been an interesting case. Don't they say history repeats

itself?"

"They do," agreed Miss Pettigrew. "But I must admit I do not see the application of that particular proverb in present circumstances, unless you mean that every criminal makes mistakes."

"Heaven help the police if he didn't," said Crook piously. "You know how it says in the Psalms something about the pit they have digged they have fallen in themselves? Of course, in Miss Bond's case, she got shoved in, but if she hadn't digged the hole she wouldn't have got anything worse than a sprained ankle."

"Could you," asked Miss Pettigrew very, very politely, "condescend to my level and tell me what you are talking about?"

"If you like," said Crook obligingly, "though I'm sure you could do as much for me and more also. Let's start with Number One on the list—Miss Isabel Bond. Come to think of it, that was the only successful crime of the three, the other two bein' boomerangs. It was successful, too, in the sense that the one responsible 'ull never be brought to justice."

"Not man's justice," acceded Miss Pettigrew.

"That's what I was talkin' about. Of course it's too late now, but even if it hadn't been she'd never have been where John Sherren is at this minute, waitin' to hear himself ticked off for willful murder. But, you see, sugar—this is the point I'm tryin' to make—it takes a real genius to get away with murder. Miss Bond thought she'd done it. And mind you, she wasn't such an amateur as most. This was her second try."

"Second? I was not aware of that."

"No little bird whisper in your ear how the old Colonel died?"

"Colonel Bond? Of heart failure."

"It's like what I told you, history repeats itself. Yes, he died of heart failure at a mighty convenient time for Miss Bond. No one ever tell you the tale of the Colonel's last romance?"

"I fear you have forgotten my request that you would come down to my level," Miss Pettigrew reminded him.

"Well, then there's every reason to suppose Miss Bond helped Daddy over the line to stop him marrying on his death-bed."

"That is a very dangerous assumption, Mr. Crook."

"All right. You tell me any other reason why she should hand over half her fortune to his nurse immediately after the funeral."

Not many people saw Miss Pettigrew at a disadvantage, but at that moment Crook joined their number. She looked at him, literally open-mouthed.

"I feel sure you must be mistaken," she said at last in an uncertain voice. "Clara has never given anything away in her whole life."

"There was a mistake, all right," agreed Crook, "but it was Miss Bond's, not mine. And, of course, the Colonel's. If I win my guess, nursie wasn't a dear little angel of mercy, but a tough go-getter who knew how to pull the wool over the eyes of doting old gentlemen."

"Blackmail! Dear me, and I never suspected it. Clara certainly knew how to consume her own smoke. That must have made quite a hole in her fortune."

You had to hand it to her, Crook acknowledged, she could take it on the chin.

"It's what I was saying," he continued. "No one ever came into the open and accused Miss B. of murder, but someone knew and saw to it that she paid. Now again, no one's come into court and said she pushed her sister over the balcony, but if someone didn't know, they had a pretty shrewd notion, and decided she should pay again. Clear so far?"

"Perfectly. And you know the identity of the person?"

"Not so much choice, is there? Someone who cared for Miss Isabel. That cuts Marlowe right out, because he cared mostly for what she had. I'd lay all the cash this case is going to cost me he came down to see what he could get out of the old lady; that's why I don't think it was him wrote the anonymous letters. He's not the sort of chap to waste time beating about the bush. If he wanted cash he'd come plump out and say so. As I dare say he had."

"Isabel hadn't many friends on the spot. There was Locket, of course …"

"I wondered when any one was goin* to remember her. Maybe she wasn't too happy about the accident, either. Anyhow, she left just afterwards, and though she's back in the place, I don't notice her visiting at Greenglades much. And John Sherren don't believe it was an accident …"

"And neither do I," wound up Miss Pettigrew harshly.

"And you don't think she chucked herself overboard?"

"If Isabel had intended to take her own life, of which I am by no

means convinced, there were other methods she might have employed. I remember her speaking to me once of the effects of an overdose of aspirin. Indeed, after her death I believe an untouched bottle of a hundred tablets was found among her possessions."

"Takes some nerve to go on taking a hundred aspirins," suggested Crook. "Prussic acid 'ud be quicker."

"But perhaps less easy to obtain," observed Miss Pettigrew. "Still, I cannot believe that Isabel would fling herself into space. Mr. Crook, do you believe in such a thing as indirect murder?"

"I wasn't born yesterday," said Crook kindly. " 'Course I see what you're getting at, but you do remember what I told you about proof."

"And had you considered that Clara's death may be an act of vengeance for what we may, between ourselves, regard as the murder of her sister?"

"I've told you what I think," said Crook. "It was like the Colonel's—a boomerang. And if you know of any neater way of committing murder, I'll buy it."

"Mr. Crook, I should be greatly obliged if you would explain your theory regarding Colonel Sherren's death. It might elucidate your observations about a boomerang, which at present leave me completely in the dark."

"I'll tell you. To begin with, little Johnny ain't the villain of the piece. Not the murdering kind. Too much imagination, see? The chaps who commit murder are the ones that don't see beyond the actual crime. Arthur Crook on Psychology in Twelve Lessons. All that matters to them is the elimination of X. All their imagination goes into the means toward that end. They can't see beyond the end. And when they've done their stuff they're like chaps in a blind alley. They've chased their victim down to the end and there they can club him or stamp on him with their hobnailed boots, but they haven't thought how they're going to get out. Now, there's two ways of gettin' out of a blind alley. One is to kick down the wall in front of you, and the other is to go back the way you came. A lot of them try that way and find the gentleman in blue waiting for them. Even if he ain't, there's long odds some busybody will see 'em coming out. Most of 'em try to kick down the wall, but even then they can't be sure what's on the other side. They may run slap into the back door of the jail. And that's what happened in the Colonel's death or I am a

Dutchman."

"You mean someone baited the trap and never thought …"

Crook picked her up neatly. "Never thought he might get caught up in it himself. In fact, he never thought about the consequences at all. The important thing was to get X out of the way, and it was a simple job to unhook the lid of the bath."

"Are you referring to Bligh?" asked Miss Pettigrew. "He says he had no notion he would inherit."

"I dare say he was right. Though, mind you, if it was a choice between John Sherren and Bligh, I'd back the old man."

"Surely," argued Miss Pettigrew, "it is very strange that on the one night that his nephew was in the house the disaster should occur. Surely you agree with that?"

"Never," said Crook, emphatically. "I mean, he may not be the sort of chap that gets degrees and wins scholarships, but he'd got some brains. Must have or he couldn't churn out even that stuff the way he does. And it 'ud be too much of a coincidence for the thing to happen the one night he was under the old boy's roof. Everyone, simply everyone, would point a finger at him. Now if Bligh meant to put the old man underground he'd have to wait for a night when there was a choice of criminals; and other things bein' equal, most people 'ud follow your example and plump for Johnny."

"Mr. Crook, if it was not Mr. Sherren and it was not Bligh, who was the criminal on that occasion?" That was the voice Miss Pettigrew had always used to recalcitrant pupils, and Crook, hearing it, grinned involuntarily and thanked Heaven he'd had precious little education himself.

"The only other person it could have been, the third person in the house that night," he retorted triumphantly.

"The third person? The Colonel?" Miss Pettigrew gave an impression of a lady who suspects that her companion—no gentleman—is under the influence.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" said Crook, pleasantly.

"Surely an extraordinary way to commit suicide," murmured Miss Pettigrew. "Why not turn on the gas? I understand one can get a guaranteed result for two shillings."

"Grand idea," beamed Crook. "Only two things against it. One, there

wasn't any gas in the house; and two, the Colonel wasn't plottin' to take his own life. You will keep forgettin' about the boomerang. Now, you listen to me, sugar. I was up there. I'd met the old boy. Mind you, I've a great respect for private enterprise. It takes chances no civil servant would dare consider, and it don't mind what it pays to prove it was a million miles away on the night in question. Colonel Sherren was a grand old chap, but he was as mad as a hatter, I tell you, I was up there. I know. My standards ain't very high, but he wouldn't have passed even by them. He was mad and he had no memory. Those are the two

things you have to remember. Then—I was at the inquest. A lot of play was made of the quarrel between uncle and nephew on the Tuesday night. There's no doubt about it—our Johnny with his finicky ways was just the sort of chap to drive the old boy right off his rocker, and he was tottering in any case. I talked to Bligh, as well as heard him in the witness-stand. The one thing that gets John Sherren's dander up is makin' fun of his work. I dare say they're all clap-trap, but those books of his are like a young mother's first baby, so far as he's concerned. The Colonel thought his nephew's books were tripe and he told him so. John tried to keep his temper; indeed, the worst he said was that when the old boy was dead and gone there might be critics who'd find some kind of worth in them. The operative phrase, mark you, was dead and gone. That shoved the old boy halfway into the tomb right away. And he was furious. When I'm dead and gone, fumes the old boy, this nincompoop of a nephew of mine will be peacocking round telling everyone what a fine chap he is. Shakespeare, he'll say? He'll do. Peter Cheyney? Pass in a crowd. But I'm John Sherren. Just because some old duffer doesn't understand what I'm talking about … See how the poison works? I'll get even with him, says the old man, and he sits around on his lonesome hatching his plot. I'm a better man than you are, Gunga Din. So sure you're going to see me lowered into the grave, and you giving yourself the airs of a Kipling. So up the old chap goes and unhooks the lid, and then he tells his nevvy there'll be hot water for his special benefit the next morning, so he needn't go back to his attics and tell his landlady he's been visiting the outposts of civilization, because you can have hot water in Chipping Magna just as easily as you can in Maida Vale West. See?"

"You mean he deliberately intended to murder his nephew?" "I don't suppose he thought of it like that. Just a huge joke, showing him which of

them's the best man. It's what I told you, these near-loonies don't think of the next step. He got as far as seeing little Johnny hop into the tub and give a tug to the loofah— no, don't tell me he wouldn't use another fellow's loofah, because the old boy wouldn't think of that—and down comes the lid. And, so far as the Colonel's concerned, down comes the curtain. It's like a play. When it's over how many of the audience stop to think of the actors as people with lives outside the theater? Not

one in a thousand. The play's over and so far as they're concerned the actors are dead. Want any more?"

"Please go on," said Miss Pettigrew. "It's not that I don't follow you absolutely, but you tell it all with such verve."

John Sherren would have turned purple at this juncture and changed the subject, but Crook was far too tough even to notice th') sarcasm.

"John pats his rosy cheeks and washes his lily-white hands in the pretty painted basin, same like me, though I bet he used scented soap, and he packs his bag and tips Bligh and says good-bye to his uncle, and down south he comes. He never notices anything unusual about the bath, and that lazy old devil, Bligh, doesn't either. That night the Colonel goes up for his weekly all-over dip; in he pops and swooshes like a walrus and then he reaches out for the loofah and whang! down comes the lid on his head, the lid he unfastened and forgot all about, and he's out for the count."

"You really suggest he would overlook the fact that he had unfastened the hooks less than twenty-four hours earlier?" Miss Pettigrew looked the picture of incredulity.

"Now listen to me, sugar. You've met me a few times since this show opened, but say I'd gone back to town—or you had—the next morning. Next time we met would you have remembered me?"

The old spinster smiled grimly. "I fancy you seldom have to complain of that kind of forgetfulness, Mr. Crook."

"Meanin' that if you met me an seon hence down below you wouldn't have forgotten me?"

"Meaning precisely that."

"Then get a skinful of this. The next morning, the next morning, mark you, after all our interestin' confabulations the night before, the Colonel wanted to know who the devil I was, what I was doin' in his house, who let me in and how the blazes long did I mean to stay? It took

Bligh a good minute or more to bring me back to his mind. Now, are you going to tell me that a chap with that sort of memory is going to remember a detail like unlatching the lid of a bath? Y'see, I dare say he wasn't even surprised to find his nephew at the breakfast table, and if his plan had worked he'd very likely have rounded on Bligh and asked him why the devil he'd been so careless, instead of making sure everything was hunky-dory before dear little Johnny took off his dear little vest."

"A very ingenious theory," acknowledged Miss Pettigrew. "It would be even more impressive if you had an atom of proof to support it."

"You don't think there's anything queer about the old boy changing the habits of a lifetime and providin' hot water to tempt his nevvy into the bath? First time in, say, thirty years, and only made up his mind at the eleventh hour?"

"You may be right." Miss Pettigrew prided herself on her sense of justice. "Then your verdict would be suicide?"

"Suicide argues a deliberate act on the part of the corpse. No, I'm a lawyer, but I have to admit I don't knoAv Avhat you'd call it. I dare say a moralist would call it the mills of God. But whatever it is, the verdict in Miss Bond's case is the same."

Miss Pettigrew looked staggered. "The same, Mr. Crook?"

"I warned you before, don't try throwing dust in my eyes. Who to our certain knowledge had pheno-barbitone? Miss Bond. No one's been able to show that any one else at the tea party possessed any. And where did she keep it? In her bag. And what does it look like? Saccharine as near as makes no difference."

"But—she didn't put any saccharine into her own cup. She gave hers to Mr. Marlowe and before she could stop him Mr. Sherren put what we assumed to be saccharine into her tea."

"So he did," aQ;reed Crook. "And then he said he threw the empty bottle in a waste-paper basket, but eventually it was found in his pocket, nicely hidden in the hem. And there was a newly mended hole in the lining. And he didn't put anything out of his bottle into his cup of tea. Oh, yes, the police noticed that all right. But, as I'm sure you noticed. Miss B. didn't put any of the contents of her bottle into her cup either, and when her little bottle was found it was empty. Don't that add up to something?"

"You are so much better at arithmetic than I," Miss Pettigrew flattered him.

"And there's one other point. Don't it strike you as queer that a lady who never takes saccharine should have it so handy, when she didn't even know she was goin' to have visitors that night?"

"Dear me!" said Miss Pettigrew. "You don't miss much, Mr. Crook, do you? I suppose you have it all worked out from start to finish?"

"I don't know so much about the start," said Crook. "But I could

fill in the gaps at the end, tell that blundering Inspector why he couldn't find the empty bottle in the waste-paper basket and how it was John Sherren let them find the tablets in his overcoat."

Miss Pettigrew nodded her long horse head till Crook felt that in another moment he'd put his hand in his pocket and offer her a lump of sugar on its palm.

"I should have guessed, too," she acknowledged. "Clara never did anything without a reason, and when she insisted on our going up that night while she remained behind with her nephew I should have put two and two together." She stopped nodding her head at last and said: "And what now?"

"Your move," said Crook, briskly.

"I suppose," said Miss Pettigrew, "you wouldn't care to give me a clue?"

Now Crook did put his hand in his pocket and brought out a couple of shillings that he spun casually on the surface of the table.

"Thank you," said Miss Pettigrew, "I shan't require them. But really," she rose to indicate that the interview was at an end, "it amazes me that Mr. Attlee, who is supposed to have a genius for discovering hidden talent, has not called you into consultation in his difficulties long ago."

But Crook, rising too, said these talent-scouts would go hunting under bushels, "and with my figure," he added, "a bushel's no more use to me than a divan bed."

21

MR. TWEMLOW had gone back to town. He hadn't liked the case from the start and the more deeply he became involved the less he liked it. His firm didn't deal in criminal cases: wills, property, all the respectable side of the law—that was his cup of tea. He was thankful that John Sherren had never been a client of his. It was a good thing the fellow was in prison and likely to remain there. Even that development complicated matters, for under the will he was Miss Bond's sole heir, and though that meant precious little, seeing she had only left a wardrobe of moth-eaten clothes and a few personal possessions that wouldn't keep anyone out of the poorhouse for a month, a man charged with a capital crime couldn't inherit. Of course, he acknowledged grudgingly, he might be acquitted, but if not, the legacy reverted to the Crown.

Miss Pettigrew, who returned at the same time, was another thorn in his side. She offered to assist him in the disposal of the dead woman's lares and penates. The clothes, she suggested, might be given to some decrepit gentlewoman's association. It would hardly be worth offering them to a dress agency, everything was so old-fashioned and so well worn.

"Not so fast, madam," snapped Mr. Twemlow, and explained about the position in law of a man in John Sherren's shoes.

"Meaning that a proven murderer, whether reprieved or not, cannot inherit? I scarcely think that he would be interested in his legacy in any case, unless he is proposing to open an amateur museum of Victorian curiosities."

Mr. Twemlow let that pass. It struck him as being in exceedingly poor taste. But for the time being there was nothing to be done about poor Clara Bond's bits and pieces.

Crook also had gone back to town. There was no question of the trial coming up just yet. John had been told he could have legal advice if he had no lawyer of his own, and he divided his time between trying to convince his unenthusiastic counsel that he had been framed and wishing that he could rewrite One Fair May Morning in the light of his own prison experience and prospects. He'd do it so much better now. Crook, that arch-cynic, would have said: "That's life all over, chum. By the time you've learnt anything, it's too late to be of any use to you."

"When's this case going to break?" Bill Parsons asked Crook in the office in Bloomsbury Street.

"Any day now," said Crook reassuringly.

"Before John Sherren comes to trial?" Bill was persistent.

"John Sherren's never coming to trial," said Crook. "I can tell you that. No, he'll scuttle back to his kind Mrs. Pringle and die in his nice three-foot bed under his chaste eiderdown, probably writing his own obituary. And that," he added with unwonted vindic-tiveness, "is about what he deserves."

The case broke that afternoon. He had rather thought he might have a visit from Miss Pettigrew, but she sent her messenger in the shape of a letter, enclosing a check for a hundred pounds. She had written this and a number of other letters in the bed-sitting-room of the ladies' club in London, where she had lived ever since her retirement. She wrote them far into the night, sealed and stamped them and then went to bed. Next morning she was down early before the postman came, and collected the letters from the mat. There was one for her, from a furrier in Bond Street who should have known better, offering to value, store, repair, remodel or exchange her non-existent fur coat. She put the letter in her pocket and went to look for Miss Bennett, the principal of the ladies' club.

"I have a letter here," said she calmly. "I have to go down to Brakemouth on a matter of business."

"What, again. Miss Pettigrew?" said Miss Bennett sympathetically. "How tiresome for you."

"Oh, this will be the last time," said Miss Pettigrew, going up stairs, where she destroyed the furrier's letter and made her bed, laid a towel over the top of the old-fashioned water-jug, closed and locked her wardrobe, closed the drawers of the dressing-table, put on her traveling coat, took her neat furled umbrella, opened the window and said good-

bye to the room she would see no more.

On her way to the station she posted the letters she had written the previous night. By the time they were opened by their recipients she would be well out of the way.

The last person to see her was Mr. Bates. Mr. Bates had come down to Brakemouth with his wife for a "change" after Maggie Bates had flu. On this particular afternoon, in spite of the rather choppy sea, he rented a boat and went for a row. Mrs. Bates preferred to roam through the High Street of Brakemouth looking for full-fashioned lisle stockings. Then she would go to a movie.

"You can do that at home," objected Mr. Bates.

"I could," agreed Maggie, "if I didn't have to spend all my time on the housekeeping." A typical married couple. So Mr. Bates collected the fifteen-year-old son of his landlady and the pair went out together. They were getting on well in spite of the difficult sea.

when, rounding the curve of Dead Man's Rock, the boy said: "Look, that's Mystery House," pointing to a newly painted house on the cliff. "You know, where the lady fell off the balcony."

"Oh, yes?" said Mr. Bates, vaguely.

"Wasn't it in the London papers?" asked the boy. "I tell you, it was all over the papers here. Her sister was poisoned a week back," he added triumphantly, "and they say her nephew did it. You might think the house was haunted. I'd like to see a ghost."

As though some invisible fate heard him, a figure at that moment appeared on the edge of the cliff, much too near the edge for Mr. Bates' peace of mind. She was a tall, sallow woman, dressed without a scrap of imagination, just such a drab figure as you might see in any town in the country in the fourth year of the peace.

"Is that a ghost?" exclaimed the boy eagerly, and Mr. Bates, not quite certain himself, replied sharply: "If she isn't she soon will be, if she goes much nearer the edge of the cliff. What fools these women arel" The tide was now very high and the rocks beneath the waves were quite invisible.

"Go back!" called Mr. Bates irritably. He wasn't sure if the woman heard him or not. He did not then realize that, being just round the curve of the coast, he was invisible to her, though he could see her clearly enough. The next instant he had half-risen in the boat. "Look outl" he

exclaimed. “Good God, the woman’s slipping.”

It was horrible. He had seen this sort of thing often enough in the movies without turning a hair, but in real life it was appalling. For there could be no possible doubt about it. This was no ghost, it was no accident. Mr. Bates had never seen anything more deliberate in his life. His first instinct was to prevent the lad with him from seeing what was happening, but a moment later his humanitarian sense caused him to row furiously toward the spot where the woman had disappeared.

“Can you row?” he yelled to the boy.

“I can’t swim,” the boy told him. His teeth were chattering. For weeks afterwards Mr. Bates tormented himself and Mrs. Bates wondering what he ought to have done.

“Just what you did do,” said Mrs. Bates impatiently. “You know with your wounded leg you couldn’t have done any good, and the

woman had enough on her conscience without making me a widow into the bargain. And anyway, if she wanted to go out like that, I don’t see that any one had any right to stop her.”

Mr. Bates groaned. Crook would have said: “Take it easy, pal. Dames are all the same. Law and order don’t mean a thing to them.”

And he’d have instanced Miss Pettigrew, whose letter he opened at about the time she, believing herself to be unobserved, stepped off the cliff into space.

22

IT IS a pity I cannot be with you when you read this so that you can tell me how I betrayed myself," Miss Pettigrew wrote. "I suppose you knew the truth from the beginning. I remember, when I asked you if you knew who was guilty, you said you knew who was responsible for Miss Bond's death. There was a delicate distinction there, and I did not miss it.

"Yes, of course I wrote the letters. How did you come to be so sure so soon? At the beginning, like all the criminals of whom you spoke to me, I thought no further than one step ahead. At that time murder had not entered my mind. I read somewhere some years ago that all murders that are not self-defense are first committed in the mind, in the imagination, although the actual deed may be done on the spur of the moment. But there must exist the desire, the will to murder, and it is this constant will that enables the criminal to take advantage of an opportunity and act in a flash. As I did, Mr. Crook, as I did.

"I hated Clara Bond, almost as much as I loved her sister, Isabel. I became an orphan very early in life, and when I was a child I used to imagine a sister for myself. When I started on my career as a governess I always envied those children who had sisters. To me it always seemed the most delightful of all relationships. Twenty years ago I met Isabel Bond. From that moment I knew I had met the one person with whom I should wish to spend the rest of my life. Naturally, Clara Bond was utterly opposed to any such plan.

Thanks to the terms of her father's will she had full control of all the moneys he left, so long as Isabel Bond remained unmarried. I dare say it had never occurred to the old man that she might wish to set up house with a woman friend. We had need of patience, Isabel and I. For five years we waited; then I inherited a small legacy, nothing at all

considerable but sufficient to buy a modest cottage in the country, and at the same time I was offered a post that did not involve living in. This seemed our opportunity, but once again Clara put obstacles in the way. She said that she could not agree to her sister becoming a paid housekeeper, as she would be if she had no income of her own, and if she was not to occupy this position, then she would be living on my charity. Either alternative was unthinkable. Since then Clara Bond has never missed an opportunity to keep Isabel and myself apart. Then, a short time ago, there crept into Isabel's letters a new note. She was happier than she had been for years; she spoke of some recompense for the years that the locusts had eaten. And on the heels of that information came a letter telling me of her fatal accident.

"I have never believed in this theory. I do not say that Clara Bond actually pushed her sister off the balcony; I do say she was responsible for her death. It was after her death that I began to plan my revenge. For years she had terrorized Isabel, even threatening her with incarceration in an institution for the weak-minded. Oh, I didn't want her to die quickly. I wanted her to suffer even a hundredth part of what her sister had endured for so many years. I wanted her to know what fear was. The anonymity was an essential factor. If she had known the name of her tormentor she would have taken steps to deal with the situation at once. I wanted her to be unsure if it was the woman sitting next to her in the hotel, standing behind her in the bus queue, walking apparently by chance along the same pavement, going into the same shop. I knew she hated suspense; therefore I used the vague threat. There was nothing for her to catch hold of. I never had any fear that she would go to the police; she had far too much to lose. I know at one time she suspected Locket. That was unfair to Locket, but I doubt whether she would have cared. I don't think she thought it was I. All the letters were delivered by hand or bore the Brakemouth post-mark. She was so careful about money herself she could scarcely have believed that I would make the journey simply to deliver a letter. It was so easy. I only had to wait till she left the hotel and leave my envelope then. Or I could put it among the postal deliveries. People, Mr. Crook, as I have heard you observe, believe what they wish to believe, and see what they are expecting to see. Similarly, they seldom see what they do not expect.

"Then I had an unanticipated stroke of good fortune. Miss Bond

actually asked me to come and stay at the hotel. That created innumerable small opportunities for increasing her unease. I missed none of them. Sometimes I wondered if she would be driven to taking her own life. It would never have lain on my conscience if she had, but that was a ridiculous thought. Clara had never willingly given anything away since she was born. Was it likely she would throw away her life to oblige me?

"Then a new element came into the situation. Oh, I don't mean John Sherren. I never believed he was any danger to her. No, I refer to Roger Marlowe. I only had to see her on the night of his arrival to know she was more afraid than she had ever been. He had some power over her nobody else possessed. I hold no brief for him. He was—and is—a scoundrel. He had no more heart than Clara, although he had a more winning and gracious manner. But he was as ruthless as she. If he had a weapon, as I was certain he had, he wouldn't hesitate to club her with it. When he came in that evening and she asked him to join us I knew at once that she had some plan in mind. She wouldn't give away a cup of tea unless she saw it coming back to her with compound interest. She was afraid of him and she was quite unscrupulous. Those are the important points. When she offered him saccharine and even took a little bottle from her bag my suspicions flared up. Who knew better than I that she never used the stuff, insisting on being supplied with sugar? And since she had not known there were going to be guests that night, she could not argue that she had bought the saccharine in preparation for their arrival. I watched her pour the little pellets into Mr. Marlowe's cup; there were still some left in the bottle, I could see that quite clearly, but she did not attempt to add any to her own tea. She dropped the bottle back into her bag. Then she produced the sugar, which she handed around, proving that there was no need for the saccharine.

"I said a little earlier murder starts in the mind. It must have been in hers for her to act so quickly, so relentlessly. I saw precisely what would happen. Mr. Marlowe would drink the tea; she had given him sugar in his cup, but if the original pellets had really been saccharine the tea would have been as sweet as syrup. Therefore, 1 argued, the sugar had been added to disguise any possible taste. In the morning he would be found dead in his bed. When questions were asked it would be discovered that he had insufficient means even to settle his hotel bill. Clara could come forward with a story of an attempted loan and John Sherren would back

her up. I am convinced Marlowe came to Brakemouth for no other reason than to obtain money from Clara Bond. It wasn't her first experience of blackmail, remember. Then she had paid up, seeing no alternative. Now presumably she had nothing left with which to pay. It would not seem strange to the police that the man should take his own life; he was an adventurer, a man whose past, I dare say, would not endure examination. Oh, it was all quite simple and, if I had not been present, it would have been quite successful.

"I knew at once that here was just such an opportunity as I had awaited. It might never come again. And as I was planning how to act, and time was very short, John Sherren unwittingly became, my accomplice. I saw that he was stirring his tea violently and I jolted the table a little, with the result that a few drops splashed on to Clara Bond's frock. Instantly there was a commotion; Marlowe must ring the bell, John must try and mop up the drops with his handkerchief; the chambermaid came in and was given instructions. And, while all attention was centered on Miss Bond I *changed the cups, Mr. Crook*—I CHANGED THE CUPS."

Crook threw the tidily written sheets onto the table and put his hand over his eyes. He seemed tired, which was unusual for him. Bill tentatively picked up the letter.

"Go ahead," invited Crook. "She makes vinegar sound like raspberry syrup."

While Bill skimmed the letter Crook opened the enclosure that was folded very small. It consisted of a check for a hundred pounds and a brief note signed F.P.

"I send you this as a fee for your trouble. If you try to donate it to a Home for Unwanted Spinsters or any such nonsense I shall do my best to haunt you. When you offered me that two shillings (for the gas meter) I knew you had, as Mr. Marlowe would say, rumbled me. And, after all, I cannot take that way out. My father always taught me that a gentlewoman should be considerate, and it would involve the principal of the ladies' club in serious inconvenience. She would have to attend the inquest, and there might be feeling about occupying a room where a woman had taken her life. I did think of following Isabel's example and buying a bottle of aspirins, but the world is full of benevolent busybodies and I doubt whether I should be allowed to die quietly on my park bench. Someone,

with those excellent intentions which pave the way to hell, would telephone for an ambulance, there would be doctors and stomach-pumps and I should be hauled back to life to face a charge of attempted suicide. So I shall go at the spot where we first met, where Isabel went in—her place, her way. I have written to the police and to Mr. Sherren, though I know too little of the law to realize whether he will be allowed to receive my letter. But I rely on you to see justice done so far as he is concerned. In Clara's case I preferred to take the law into my own hands." Then came her scrawled initials, and underneath a final note.

"Considering how hard I have often found it to live, it is strange how difficult it is to die."

Bill threw the papers on to the table.

"That's the way you figured it out, I suppose?" he suggested.

"I never believed John Sherren was guilty. To begin with, he ain't the type, and for another thing, even if he'd had the tablets with him, and there was no proof he'd ever possessed any, he would hardly have been crazy enough to put 'em into her cup of tea under the eyes of two witnesses. They'd both have remembered he didn't help himself from his own bottle. Y'see, in a case like this, you can't go on suppositions. You have to go on facts. Who had the pheno-barbitone? Answer—Miss Bond. Who wanted someone out of the way? Again—answer. Miss Bond. Who'd done something of the same kind before—you get me. Bill. Miss Pettigrew was right. No one would be surprised to find Marlowe had taken the easy way out."

"I thought you said there was no proof anyone except Miss Bond had the stuff," Bill objected.

"There wasn't, but she meant to rectify that. That's why she sent Miss P. and the others off ahead of her. She didn't really want

to talk to her nephew; she wanted five minutes' grace. I don't know exactly how her plans were shaped, but murder's frequently a matter of trifles. As they came into the hall John Sherren chucked his empty saccharine bottle into the waste-paper basket. Quick as light Miss Bond sent him back to the drawing-room on a fool's errand. The instant he was out of sight she nipped up the empty bottle and poured into it all that

remained of her tablets. Then she made her mistake. If murderers didn't trip up on trifles there'd be no convictions. She put the tablets, as she thought, into the pocket of Marlowe's coat hanging on the wall. But she forgot that John Sherren had a coat so damn like it she couldn't tell them apart, and Marlowe had taken his coat upstairs over his arm when he went up in the elevator with the rest. It was sheer chance the phial slipped through a hole in the pocket: otherwise, of course, J. S. might have discovered it, dirown it out. When her nevvie came back she was all agog to get upstairs, shut the door, and wait. She knew she wouldn't have to wait long. Of course you can't see through stone walls, not even women with cats' eyes like Clara Bond. She couldn't know that, thanks to her death, the teacups wouldn't be washed, the waste-paper baskets wouldn't be emptied. It's a funny thing," he added, nodding toward the cupboard in the corner of the room as an indication that he could do with a bottle of Bass, "that the two people who were meant to pass out are about the only two who are left alive: Marlowe and John Sherren. I told you he'd die in his bed like a little gentleman, with his landlady to fold his lily-white hands and stick the white flower of a blameless life between them."

He sounded moved, but no one had ever seen Bill jolted out of his composure.

"What would have been her situation in law?" he asked. "Did she murder the old girl simply by changing the cups?"

"Malice aforethought," said Crook. "That's all the prosecution have to prove. And those letters she wrote would have proved it."

"How could you be so sure she did write them?"

"She gave herself away very early in the game. She wasn't supposed to have been near Brakemouth since Isabel died, but she knew the house had been repainted during the last month, that such-and-such a shop had reopened, and a cinema rechristened. The only person who could know was someone who had been coming down at regular intervals for some months, and we know she hadn't come to see Miss Bond or to see Locket, and if she wanted a breath of sea air what's wrong with Brighton? Another thing—nobody but Miss Bond and the writer knew what was in that last letter, but she spoke of a hackneyed quotation that anyone might have employed. I looked through the letters—there wasn't any quotation there. So you see? She knew because she wrote it. And, of course, she left it on the table on her way to the lift. That's why nobody saw it till John

Sherren came out of the drawing room."

"Anything else?" Bill knew his man. Crook was keeping the best point to the end.

"Yes. It's queer how chaps give themselves away. You remember Miss P. saying she always went along for a few minutes' chat with her hostess—you can't say friend—last thing at night. Now you're not going to tell me that she perambulated through the corridor in her nighty. In fact, she said she always went along before she undressed. But on diat last night, when John Sherren came to her door, she was all ready for beddy-byes, dressing-gown, shawl, and all. See what that means? She wasn't going along to Miss Bond that night. And why? Because Miss Bond would be too far gone to expect her, and anyhow she didn't want to be the last to see Clara Bond alive. She might have been asked some awkward questions. Didn't she think the old dame looked a bit queer? Didn't it occur to her to call in the doctor? But no, she never intended to go along. Mind you, she didn't expect to see John Sherren either. That's one of the things you can't count on. You can never be absolutely sure a murder's going according to plan. Hers was to say she couldn't wait any longer for Miss B. to come upstairs and she went to bed. Simple, my dear Watson. But that's the trouble, Bill. Murder ain't simple. Miss P. always insisted it was. Very superior about it, too. Any murder she might commit 'ud be the perfect murder. And so," he acknowledged frankly, "it might have been if she hadn't double-crossed herself by askin' me to hold a watchin' brief. You know, havin' guts is all right and where'd we be without 'em? But if you keep a lion on the premises it don't follow you have to put your head in its mouth and dare it to snap its jaws. That's what Janes don't understand. They expect a lion to go on bein' a gentleman to the end of the chapter. Well, outsiders sometimes romp home and this is little Johnny's race all right."

John Sherren, however, didn't agree with him. He came to see Crook after his release, just to get some of the gaps filled in. As a practising realistic novelist he had the wit to know he was never likely to be involved in anything so dramatic again.

"All grist to the mill," Crook consoled him. "Think what a yarn you'll be able to write now."

"That's just what troubles me," said John, round-eyed as an owl in his earnestness, "it's the first suspicion I've had that I may be slipping."

“Slipping?” said Crook in polite mystification. “Make allowance for the old ‘uns. I can’t keep up with you.”

“I pride myself on my knowledge of character,” said John. “I had met Miss Pettigrew, I had heard her views on murder. I saw her change the cups that night, and I couldn’t put two and two together to make it four till it was too late.”

And while Crook, flummoxed for once, feeling he had received a major jolt in the solar plexus, choked for words, the novelist who couldn’t sell and the mathematician who couldn’t add, took up his exaggerated black Anthony Eden and exited like a tragedy clown.

THE END